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A VIRGIN WIDOW.

A NOVEL.

BY

OLIVER GREY.

VOL. II.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

London

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A VIRGIN WIDOW.



CHAPTER XII.—*Continued.*



PAST, PRESENT, AND FUTURE.

MRS TOWNSEND was equal to the occasion,—no one more alive to the fact of having subdued what she thought to be a haughty spirit; and, hastily plucking a bloom or two of the hothouse flowers, placed them on the fair bosom of her step-daughter, then gently kissing her forehead, said,—

“We will look forward, dear, to brighter days with less unpleasant surroundings than

these ; let us speak no more of the past, but with hopeful hearts anticipate some happy hours that may be in store for us."

A depth of melancholy pervaded Nora's face as she responded,—

"Dear mamma, place the most implicit confidence in all my future actions. I will never again deceive you or my father ; I will devote the residue of my life with the full determination of regaining your affection," and burying her face in her white cambric handkerchief, she hurried into the shrubbery that adjoins the lake, and sitting down on the moss-covered bank, overshadowed by a wealth of flat boughs of a cedar of Lebanon, which seemed, as it were, to stretch forth its arms invitingly, she wept aloud.

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The wood pigeons were cooing amidst the ash trees ; the ripple from an adjacent stream in its onward course, as it splashed over pre-

capituous falls, fell monotonously on the ear; the weeping willows parted their pale boughs in the stream; the lark, soaring higher and higher in the bright blue firmament, poured forth a shower of delicious notes. It was all sweet music to Nora: her soul was gladdened by the sounds so familiar to her;—then a gentle hand was laid on her shoulder.

“What, my Sissy! on the damp grass, and been crying too!” said Gertrude, who, for the last few minutes had been intently eyeing her step-sister through the thick foliage of the shrubbery.

“Go, go, dear,” replied Nora; “leave me alone for a while; my head is aching—”

“And my heart,” responded Gertrude, brushing away a gushing tear that had trickled down her glowing cheek.

“Go, go, my child,” continued Nora, with a sob in her voice.

“Not likely, Miss Moping,” answered Gertrude. “I will go with you, or you must come with me, and that is all about it, you dismal, dear Sissy; out of my sight you shall not wander this day. By-the-bye, they are hay-making in the lower meadow; the Branscomb girls from the rectory and the curate are having fine fun down there;—no end of sweet hay.”

“Sweet nonsense, Gerty; you know how I detest such frivolity.”

“Oh, I dare say; you want to hide yourself like a quail in the grass: there is no putting you up,” and seizing her sister by both wrists, gently pulled her to a standing position, and kissing her, said,—“There, take that, and that, though you don’t deserve it one bit.”

“Bless your little fond heart; you are a jewel of a child,” said Nora, giving her a gentle squeeze.

“Thank you, Mrs Moping,” with a mock curtsy.

“Why on earth, Gerty, do you persistently call me that hateful name?”

“When you are not present, mamma always calls you Mrs Moping,” said the little tease.

“And is that a sufficient reason why you should indulge in the same absurd epithet, Gerty? Call me what you may, my child, in words emanating from your own loving heart, and I should not be discomposed, but do not sting me by reiterating the title Mrs Townsend has thought proper to circulate throughout the Castle.”

“Nay, have I stung you so badly, Sissy, as all that? I hope I have not seriously wounded your sensitive feelings,” replied Gertrude.

Nora placed her rosebud lips to her sister's, again squeezed her affectionately, whispered something in her ear, and with arms entwined around each other, sauntered

up the park, under the shadows of the great elms, through the rugged defiles of the wood, and onward to the golden gorse on the top of the hill, where the silent deer spring at intervals from their shaded retreat, by the banks of a clear stream that permeates the valley on the south side of the magnificent demesne.

The Belvidere on the promontory stood grim against the western sky, towering above the grand old castle and surrounding battlements, keeping watch, as it were, over the wealth of beauty beneath. Could the walls of that ancient tower speak, they would tell of joyous scenes enacted beneath their shadows,—of tournaments, and the gay and brilliant festive gatherings that followed,—of the queens and beauties of love,—of knights-errant in armour clad, opposing forces vying with each other with bitter animosity for supremacy; they could tell, too, of the long

tête-à-tête of maidens fair and their lovers under the colonnade of trees, with the pale-faced moon shedding her soft beams on the golden locks of brides elect and the polished helmets of many a brave warrior—now all past away!

“Slumbering on earth’s cold pillow.”

As years roll on, and in the course of nature, fresh faces and forms appear and disappear, but the ancient tower of the Belvidere stands fast, as a fitting monument of stirring events of the past.

“So mamma has sent out invitations for dinner on Friday,” said Gertrude, nipping off a foxglove bloom from the hedgerow, and looking inquiringly into her step-sister’s face.

“So I hear, dear,” replied Nora.

“Mamma is uncommonly anxious all at once,” continued Gertrude, “to know who

will accept, or she would not have asked me to take her letter to the rectory this morning and wait for an answer;—so very unlike her.”

“Are they coming?” asked Nora, in a careless manner.

“Coming!” exclaimed Gertrude, sententiously. “Oh, that’s very good! Did anyone ever hear of the Branscomb girls refusing to dine at the Castle? Yes, they are coming in a batch—rector, curate and all. I am rather glad Strawworth has accepted, for he is so lively.”

“Mr Strawworth, Gerty, you mean; your manner of speaking, my child, is too familiar, and not a little ‘fast.’ Do you know, dear, that men would consider it the height of rudeness if their own sex called them by their surname, unless they were on terms of the closest intimacy.”

“And then it becomes a kind of privi-

lege, I suppose," interrupted Gertrude, with an arch smile.

"Precisely."

"But mamma, when speaking of the curate, always says,—‘Have you seen Strawworth to-day? did Strawworth preach to-day? did Strawworth say he would dine with us on Friday?’"

"I know she does, dear, nevertheless, it is highly improper. But tell me," continued Nora, "what other invitations did your mamma send out?"

"Your mamma!" replied Gertrude, somewhat mimicking, and laying the stress very considerably on the word "your." "Why, she is your mamma as well as mine."

"Not exactly," responded Nora, with a sigh. "Mine, dear Gerty, is lying beneath the white marble monument in the chancel of Carthewin Church, where—"

"Now, don't be doing the dismal again, Sissy. If mamma is not your mamma *bona*

fide (as my governess says), she is your mamma by papa's marriage, is she not?"

"Certainly."

"And you must learn to love her, Sissy, as dearly as I do; and she, in return, will love you, I know, as fondly as she does me."

Another sigh, and Nora went on.

"Do you know if anyone else is expected at the Castle, Gerty? Mamma of late has become so reticent with regard to the internal domestic arrangements of the house, that I seldom hear what is going to take place until the eleventh hour."

"To the dinner party do you refer?"

"Yes, or to stay at the Castle."

"Mamma, I know, is exceedingly anxious to get Cuthbert over here for a week or so, but I am not certain whether he is coming, though it looks like it, for his favourite room in the bachelors' quarters is prepared

for someone—housekeeper told me so ; and I know of no one else who would be permitted to occupy it except ‘Curly Cuth,’ as we call him ; besides, many of his things are there now, which his valet was instructed not to pack up last time he visited us, such as boxing-gloves, fencing-sticks, masks, fishing-rods, etc. But why stare so, Sissy ? How you colour up.”

“Silly child,” replied Nora, visibly discomposed.

“I fancy I see Cuthbert Rodway, Esq., Justice of the Peace, all smiles, shirt-collar, and cuffs, taking down ‘la belle cousine’ to dinner,” said the tease, clapping her hands triumphantly.

A shudder visibly affected our heroine, as she listened to the playful humour of her step-sister. She had the exact truth from her, with all its simplicity and force. Nora felt that Gertrude was much too young to

make her a confidante, or even to extend a conversation on a subject which her tender years would not admit of grasping. From certain snatches of dialogues which from time to time had taken place between her father and Mrs Townsend concerning Cuthbert and his future, coupled with the everlasting praises bestowed by her step-mother on the social and moral excellence and status in society of her nephew, made her keenly alive to the fact that there was something unusual behind the scenes. With Nora's sensitive, finely-organised nature, she fancied some scheme was afloat in which she was doomed to play an important feature. She dismissed it again and again from her thoughts, but back it came with increased vehemence, —in other words, she was inspired with the most melancholy presentiment as to the future.

The sound of the gong for luncheon went

up with the wind from the Castle, and our heroine and Gertrude tripped lightly over the golden gorse and purple heather; one girl with a heart full of gloomy forebodings, and crushed with most painful experience; the other, joyous as the lark, with bright and happy expectation, with a soul shining, as it were, through her violet eyes.

CHAPTER XIII.

LAYING THE FOUNDATION.

It was on one of those sultry evenings with a cloudy sky, large drops of rain splashed heavily on the glass of the conservatory, faint flashes of lightning illuminated, at intervals, the heavens, and the distant roll of thunder betokened an approaching storm, that Godfrey Townsend and his wife were sitting over their dessert, in the spacious dining-room of Carthewin Castle.

Nora and Gertrude had retired to the drawing-room, where they were practising some duets together, and the old butler, after placing the customary row of decanters in front of his master, and handing his

mistress a glass of her favourite "Napoleon" sherry, left the room, previous to which, he was told that when his services were required, Mrs Townsend would ring the bell.

Now, Bartholomew Leonard (for the future we will call him Leonard) was an employé who had lived in the Townsend family for more than half a century, and was highly esteemed by every member of it. No one knew better than Leonard the domestic secrets in the household of Carthewin Castle. Standing in his capacity as butler behind his master's chair for so many years, also in the service of Godfrey Townsend's father, and long intercourse with the various ladies' maids, enabled him to become familiar with every "move on the board," and keenly alive to any change out of the ordinary course of things which took place from time to time, and the why and wherefore. Leonard was thoroughly con-

servative in his ideas,—an authority in all matters appertaining to the good conduct of the domestics and the internal arrangements of the Castle; and woe betide any employé who ran against this “upper” servant. No one could put a spoke in the wheel, or take one out, better than this functionary: in other words, he was “all there!” His presentable appearance, with shocks of the whitest hair, and his bulky form, was a caution to all comers!

Leonard’s dignity was somewhat hurt at being told, in an indirect way, to leave the room, and that when he was wanted Mrs Townsend would ring the bell.

“Let the bell ring as much as it likes,” said the upper servant to himself, and in high dudgeon; “I will take very good care not to answer it again to-night; let ‘Buttons’ have a ‘turn,’ if they want anything. I wonder what is ‘up’ now; something, I’ll

warrant; they wish to have it all to themselves; perhaps scandalising somebody, or worriting my young mistress's flesh off her bones. She is always being worried, poor little soul. God knows she got enough trouble, without anyone adding to it. Ah me! if her dear mother had been living, how different things would have been. The place isn't the same since poor missis was carried to the churchyard. For my part, I don't know what the service is coming to; there I've saved up a goodish bit of money, and, what's more, 'tis well invested, and if I want to 'cut it,' I can afford to do so. But something is going on, for a 'hundred.' I noticed when missis was slicing up the melon she was all of a fidget. I wonder now what is up," continued Leonard, musing to himself in the butler's pantry, where he was depositing in the iron safe some very valuable antique plate, before retiring to the upper servants' hall.

“We are going to have a tempestuous night, I fear, Godfrey,” ventured Mrs Townsend, somewhat tremulously, and rapidly stemming some strawberries.

“It looks very like it, dear,” replied her husband, helping himself to another glass of the undeniable port, at the same time viewing its ruby brightness with much complacency; then, looking towards his consort, he humorously bent his head, and hummed,—

“Such is the wife
I should look for through life—
If I did, I should know where to find her.”

Mrs Townsend, with considerable warmth and pathos, took up the refrain by singing, with marked expression,—

“Such is the man,
Deny it who can—
For well I knew where to find him.

(Now is my time; I shall never have a

better opportunity)," said Mrs Townsend, within herself; and, looking round the room to be satisfied that the course was clear, continued,—“I am uncommonly glad to see dear Nora in better spirits the last few days. She is getting to look more like herself. I don't think she is brooding nearly so much over her late troubles. Do you?”

“There is certainly, I am happy to say, a marked improvement in her demeanour,” replied Mr Townsend musingly.

“Upon my word, Godfrey, I don't think I ever saw a more charming widow in my life; and the cap she wears is most becoming. She looks

‘So bewitchingly simple.’”

“But not, as the bard has it,” interrupted Mr Townsend,—

“‘With mischief in every dimple.’”

Julia dropped her handkerchief, and, in

picking it up, coughed. Her husband was familiar with that short cough!

“Why, my dear,” continued Mr Townsend, “you are brim full of humour to-night. I think the lightning must have cleared the atmosphere somewhat.”

“Saving your presence, love,” was Mrs Townsend’s meek rejoinder, “you shot the first thunderbolt, Godfrey, whether or not,” laughingly.

“Ah, Julia, it is well to be merry and wise,” replied Godfrey, gazing wistfully at his wife, and wondering what on earth had so unexpectedly changed a nature that had of late been at almost freezing-point; but the unaffected ease and polished courtesy of Mr Townsend, most thoroughly disarmed his consort of any feeling she might otherwise have had as to her husband’s knowledge of sinister motives.

“As you observe, it is ‘well to be merry,

and it is well to be wise,' Godfrey. Temple says, 'Wisdom is that which makes men judge what are the best ends, and what the best means to attain them, and gives a man advantage of counsel and direction.' "

"Yes, Julia," interrupted Godfrey; "and Shakespeare says,—

'Wisdom and fortune combating together—
If but the former dare but what it can,
No chance may shake it.' "

"How poetical we are all at once become," rejoined Mrs Townsend thoughtfully, at the same time asking her husband to pour her out just a half-glass more pale sherry.

Godfrey thought that night he never saw his wife look half so handsome. A rich, warm colour pervaded her cheeks; her dark full hazel eyes spoke volumes; the play on her finely-cut mouth; her grand neck and shoulders; and with a pearl-grey satin dress developing an ample and the whitest of

busts, on which a diamond cross, cut in the most beautiful facets, glittered like a cascade of lights.

“*Apropos* of our daughter, darling,” said Mrs Townsend, “now that we are alone, let us calmly consider a domestic matter which has of late very much occupied my thoughts, in connection with the future of our dear Nora, and which, if I am not mistaken, you are not altogether unfamiliar with, or probably averse to.”

At that moment a clap of thunder, with some violence, spoke, as it were, disapprovingly. Poodle number one and poodle number two, lying in a corner of the room on a tiger-skin mat, found shelter under their mistress’s ample robes; and before Mr Townsend could reply to his wife’s query, the door opened, and Nora and Gertrude appeared, the heavy thunder having much terrified them, and driven both with haste to the dining-room.

“Oh! father, what fearful weather it is,” said Nora, looking exceedingly pale.

“You need not be the least alarmed, my good daughter,” said Mr Townsend, drawing her affectionately towards him, and pressing his lips to her marble-like forehead.

“Good fiddlesticks!” breathed Mrs Townsend, very *sotto voce*.

“I am not altogether alarmed, my dear father; but we do not like to hear such a terrific outburst in the elements, and—”

“I vote we stay here, Nora dear,” interrupted Gertrude, “under the wings of our ‘Mam’ and ‘Dad,’” settling herself in an easy-chair.

If Leonard, just at that moment, had been in the room, he, and he alone, could have deciphered Mrs Townsend’s countenance, and given the reader a graphic description of the mental agony that his mistress was enduring in those brief minutes.

Mrs Townsend thought that heavy clap of thunder a little ominous, coming as it did immediately upon the closing sentence of the colloquy with her husband, and which for some time she had been steeling her nerves to venture upon.

Nora could evidently discern, by Mrs Townsend's manner, that her presence was objectionable; that she had disturbed some important conversation at an unfavourable moment; and as her father did not give her the slightest encouragement to stay, but rather in a quiet way, by masonic signs with his black eyes, invited her to make tracks, she immediately gathered her draperies about her, and with Gertrude disappeared for the night, hiding an aching heart with a smooth brow.

There was a long pause—only heavy drops of rain on the tessellated terrace, and the ticking of the old clock could be heard. The

ruddy fruit wafted their apple scent from the orchard through the open casement ; the summer lightning at intervals illuminated the eastern sky.

“ If it meet with your pleasure, Godfrey, shall we take up the thread of our conversation ? ” ventured Mrs Townsend.

“ Delighted, Julia,” replied the lord of the soil, with his usual ease and affable nonchalance, at the same time filling his wine-glass to the brim with burgundy, and throwing his serviette across his knee, awaited further discourse.

“ For some months past,” resumed Mrs Townsend (with a tear in her eye), “ I have been meditating on the present condition and future prospects of our daughter Nora ; and although we see her improving, nevertheless her joyous habits and youthful enthusiasm are not what they were Godfrey, or what they ought to be ; and it is a

duty which devolves upon you and me to go to her rescue, and exercise our best directed endeavours in the hope of lifting her, so to speak, out of the depth of melancholy into which (through her own indiscretion) she has unfortunately fallen."

Mr Townsend sipped his wine approvingly, and bent his head more than once during the conversation. He thought of the words "juncture," "climax," and "fatality!"

"And," continued Mrs Townsend, "I look for, as a natural consequence, your most cordial co-operation in that which I have to propose."

"Which is always at your service, Julia, in the discharge of any matter where my honour is not compromised."

"You may rest assured, Godfrey," resumed Mrs Townsend, with an air of offended pride, "I shall most religiously guard your honour as I should mine own; indeed, where one

is compromised, the other, by our happy union, would, as a common result under such circumstances, become tarnished."

Godfrey Townsend, though somewhat in the vale of years, was not a man easily led away by any covert influences his wife may possess. He was prominently endowed with the organ of "causality," and could trace with considerable penetration the cause and effect of most things ; also let it be recorded that he was possessed of a goodly share of common-sense,—indeed a practical, matter-of-fact man, of forbearing disposition, very sensible of his own faults, but by no means quick to condemn others ; and he was swift in taking prompt action in rendering a signal service to his neighbour in time of adversity or otherwise. With such a combination of virtues, one could not be surprised at Godfrey Townsend being intuitively aware of what was passing in the back-

ground of his wife's mind, neither insensible to her caprice.

"You speak like a very good book, my dear Julia," rejoined her husband; "it is refreshing to take a leaf out of it sometimes."

"Truth is great, and will prevail," responded Mrs Townsend, with an air of considerable pre-occupation; "but to the point of our interesting conversation, in which, I fear, we are lamentably digressing."

"You owe the latter, my love, to your vast extent of erudition," replied Mr Townsend, a little jocosely, again filling his glass, and asking his wife to proceed.

"Erudition indeed! Fiddlesticks! Now seriously, Godfrey, I know of no course to adopt with our daughter which is likely to have such lasting and beneficial results in the temperature of her mind, and the melancholy to which I have previously referred, as to delicately 'open up,' or I

should more properly say, lay the foundation of a well-assorted alliance with some good Christian member of society and county gentleman of sterling worth,—one who could be absolutely relied upon, and who would, as far as we are able to penetrate into human nature, make our daughter an affectionate partner in this life.”

“Good ! Very good ! I may say supremely good, Mrs Townsend. Well reasoned, well said, and sound to the core. But it not unfrequently happens that one selects a nut—take this Brazilian for instance—you crack it, but the kernel is defective. By Jove ! it is a bad one,—see ! How funny.”

“True, Godfrey. In my case, however, I am free to admit I found the nut perfect when I selected you.”

Mr Townsend pulled one of his grey shocks of hair, with mock complacency.

“And I don’t see,” continued Mrs Townsend,

“why the same may not reasonably apply to the future of our Nora.”

“Well, Julia, you are aware we have a large circle of acquaintance, or, as you not unfrequently designate them, ‘strictly county,’ and at this moment I would give one of my eyes, so to speak, to be able to ‘spot’ a *fiancé* for my beloved child, the very personification, the ideal man, you would have our Nora allied to; but, unhappily, so far as I am able to discriminate, there is not a member of our acquaintance who has a claim to the long list of virtues such as you have propounded and would desire in the consort of our daughter.”

“It is but a poor compliment, Godfrey, to our large family connections, to have such an opinion of them,” replied Mrs Townsend, with stinging sarcasm.

“Not at all, love,” said Godfrey, pinking slightly. “In the first place, I did not refer to family connections, but to the generality of

our acquaintance, of whom, no doubt, there are many most excellent, pious, and worthy men ; and many, I am grieved to admit, not worth the snuff of a candle. And now, my love, having exhausted my humble sentiments on a subject which I should like to have avoided, perhaps you will obligingly intimate to me if you are prepared to submit the name of any-one of our associates or personal friends whom you consider to be a thoroughly eligible person worthy of being admitted into our midst."

"I am," replied Mrs Townsend, with some complacency ; "and one who, I feel assured, would make Nora a good husband."

Poor Townsend ! He again fancied he heard the shrill ring of "juncture," "climax," and "fatality." Though dreading the result of further inquiry, he drawled out a little incoherently the monosyllables, — "Name him !" at the same time finding refuge in his glass of burgundy.

“My dear nephew, Cuthbert Rodway,” replied Mrs Townsend, with her sweetest expression, and she crested her head.

“Bosh, Julia!” in amazement.

“I don’t like your slang term,” said Julia petulantly.

“You are joking.”

“I am in earnest.”

“One of us must have become suddenly demented!” exclaimed Godfrey Townsend.

“I will answer for my own sanity,” replied Mrs Townsend cynically.

“We will speak no more to-night on this subject, dear,” said Mr Townsend, making a move to leave the room.

“Stay, stay, Godfrey; I infinitely prefer having this very night your candid opinion on the subject. To whom else should I go; to whom else can I go, but to Nora’s father for advice? And before you venture to give it, remember, love, Cuthbert’s birth, his social

position in society, his amiability, his presentable appearance, his age, his wealth, and—”

“Wealth be hanged!” exclaimed Godfrey, resuming his seat, and hammering his fist on the dining-table. “My Nora is the heiress of Carthewin. I would rather the girl married the poorest peasant in Europe, with a good honest heart of his own, than a millionaire with even a semblance of uncertainty in his nature. Yes, Julia, upon my soul I would,” vehemently.

“You need not introduce your soul into the matter, dear,” replied Mrs Townsend, a little discomposed, but who would not be denied. “Remember, Godfrey, what I am advancing is in the interest of your daughter, not mine; and I should be most sorry to propose an alliance of an ill-assorted character, which would hereafter cause any reflection on me; but as I happen to know that Cuthbert

is very much attached to his cousin, it is but right, before fanning such a vital spark into a flame (which may not be so easily extinguished) that I should solicit your views on the subject."

"At this moment I prefer not giving them," said Mr Townsend.

"Why?"

"Because it takes two persons to enter into an alliance, and I consider it would be monstrous on my part to express any opinion on such a momentous question without first consulting Nora, who would naturally be the main-spring of the contract, and whose feelings should in the most delicate manner be sounded."

"But eliminating Nora for the moment," replied Mrs Townsend, somewhat confused and irritated at her husband's non-compliance with her wishes. "Surely you could give me some idea (assuming our daughter was agree-

able to the proposed match) what your private views are on such an important subject."

"I fail, Julia, to see what good can possibly arise by expressing my views on a matter which more directly concerns our daughter; and I must confess I should be wanting in parental duty were I to seriously commence laying the foundation of an alliance which may have a semblance of coercion in it."

"You fail to see what good can arise," said Mrs Townsend, repeating her husband's words in a petulant manner. "I fail to see, Godfrey, I regret to say, the logic of your remarks. Now, listen to me. With that clear-sighted perception which is usually yours, you know perfectly well what has recently transpired, and all its lugubrious surroundings, in connection with Nora and the late Lieutenant Snowdon; and, alas! we know too well the bitter pill we have, one and all, had to swallow,

owing to that fatal precipitation, — that clandestine marriage in a vile registrar's office ; the heiress of Carthewin (as you call her) ; her father, the owner of this vast estate ; your wife and your beloved daughter Gertrude paraded before a discerning public branded with—”

“D—n the discerning public !” exclaimed Godfrey vehemently, at the same time asking to be excused the adjective.

“Branded,” went on Mrs Townsend, “with such a mean and dishonourable transaction as was enacted in that atrocious registrar's office, which is a curse and a burning disgrace to any civilised nation. How far we have all descended in the social scale of society in consequence, you best know ; anyhow, if you do not realise the position, you may take it for granted that I have a clear perception of it.”

“Social humbug! I am most heartily sick of listening to such trash,” interrupted Mr Townsend, throwing (in his temper) his serviette at one of the white poodle dogs on the hearth-rug, which soon made tracks, again finding refuge under his mistress’s sweeping robes, and looking amazed at such an unprovoked assault.

“I really must ask you, Godfrey, not to give way to any temper: it is neither kind nor gentlemanlike to do so. I have but one object in view, and I challenge you or any living soul to say if that object is not worthy of your most earnest consideration. I am naturally anxious that we shall never again have reason to record a repetition of such fatal results as we have recently and most unhappily experienced; to avoid such, I am now proposing a scheme which—”

“Scheme be hanged! I hate the term!” shouted Godfrey, with a stinging look.

“I will adopt a word better suited to the taste of your finely-organised, sensitive nature,” said Mrs Townsend, with a deep and embarrassed sigh. “I am proposing an honourable, and, I trust, judicious means by which your daughter will regain the position that I feel she has so deplorably lost, and I know of no other course that will assuredly lift her high and dry in social excellence as a well assorted marriage with such an one as my dear nephew Cuthbert, who I am satisfied is passionately fond of his cousin; and his unblemished honour and morality should earn for him the best woman in the land.

“Unblemished honour and morality,” echoed Mr Townsend, within himself. “Yes, when frivolity and sensuality alternately predominate! No, no, may every stone in Carthewin Castle crumble away,

may yonder Belvidere be razed to the ground, before I give my consent to such a wild, unlooked-for alliance !”

A long pause.

“Well, my dear,” said Mr Townsend, squeezing his wife’s hand with some sincerity, “your intentions, I have reason to believe, are good ; but sometimes we err in our judgment, and, therefore, two heads are better than one.”

“What on earth avails the second head if the owner of it persistently refuses to place the same at one’s disposal ?” replied Mrs Townsend sharply.

“I was about to observe,” continued Godfrey, “that after I have had a careful interview with Nora on the very grave subject at issue, my judgment—for what it is worth—is very much at your service.”

“Then, if I understand you rightly, you are positively determined, Mr Townsend,

not to express your opinion, or, in other words, commit yourself to-night in the matter."

"Determined—absolutely determined!"

"Perhaps you may be right after all," said Mrs Townsend, rising from her seat and kissing her husband's broad forehead; "when do you think it desirable to 'open up' the subject to Nora?"

"No hurry—"

"Delays are dangerous."

"And haste not unfrequently vexatious," continued Mr Townsend.

"By-the-bye," said Julia, "Cuthbert is coming to the Castle the week after next to stay a short time. It may be prudent not to say anything to your daughter until after his visit has terminated. Nora and he will, no doubt, be thrown much together during his sojourn here, and each will have an opportunity of judging the merits of

one another, and forming a better perception of the value and probable durability of the materials that go to make up the requirements of a happy wedded life."

"Well said again, gospel every word," replied Mr Townsend, with complacency. "Nothing could be more straightforward."

"You are not angry with me, are you?" asked Mrs Townsend, with a sigh.

"How could I be?"

"You look a little dismal."

"We will talk no more to-night, Julia, on a subject in which we have each been somewhat out of our depth. Shall I ring the bell for Leonard?"

"Thanks," said Mrs Townsend, caressing both poodles, who appeared greatly delighted that the colloquy was over.

"I am going to retire to the smoking-room, Julia. Kindly tell Leonard to bring me some brandy and soda-water."

When Mr Townsend passed through the long corridor which led into a spacious hall, just at the foot of the main staircase, he found Nora standing in mute reverie behind one of the lay figures of the knights in armour, that were arrayed in warlike attitudes in various parts of the basement; around the lofty walls were hung some fine examples of Raphael, Rubens, Correggio, and Titian. The subdued light from the pendant hall-lamp threw a sombre reflection on all surrounding objects. The steady tick of the antique clock was the only sound to be heard, except the heavy tread of the owner, which echoed through the hall.

“How now, child!” exclaimed Mr Townsend, starting back apace; “I thought you had gone to bed long since.”

“Nay, father dear, I could not feel happy without intercepting you and asking for

‘toll’ before you pass,” and Nora threw her arms around her parent’s neck.

She gave him a fond embrace, at the same time whispering some loving words into his ear; then tripping up two stairs at a time, was soon out of sight through the long galleries that led to the sleeping apartments.

The bulky frame of Godfrey Townsend sauntered leisurely into the smoking-room, where he threw himself into a spacious lounging-chair, and gave himself up to much serious contemplation, reviewing past events, and anticipating the future with the greatest anxiety. A small crimson patch on either cheek showed too plainly the tumult working within that massive, square-looking head; and as the smoke from his silver-mounted meerschaum sent forth wreath after wreath of the narcotic mixture, resolutions were made, doubts and difficulties solved; and not until the old clock in the tower chimed the

midnight hour, and the whole of the inmates of the Castle were supposed to be wrapped in the arms of Morpheus, did that good husband and the best of parents follow their example.

CHAPTER XIV.

THE SHADOW OF COMING EVENTS.

“MAMMA,” said Gertrude, who was diligently spreading some anchovy paste over her buttered toast at breakfast, a week subsequent to the close of our last chapter, “the Branscomb girls are coming this afternoon.”

Mrs Townsend was at that moment busily engaged in presiding at the breakfast-table, and sweetening sundry cups of tea and coffee. She did not apparently hear what her daughter said, and made no reply.

“Strawworth is coming too, mamma,” she continued, looking very picturesque in her morning attire.

At the name of Strawworth, Mr Townsend,

who was intently devouring the contents of a letter with mourning edges, looked over his gold spectacles significantly, but did not speak, again finding refuge in the correspondence in which he seemed deeply and unusually interested. Leonard knew something "was up," and was keenly alive to the sudden transition of his master's countenance, when handing him an omelette; and he observed a warm flush steal over Mr Townsend's face, and "straight as cold again."

Butlers, as a rule, make within themselves quiet mental, and form their own deductions as to what is passing in the minds of those with whom they are so much associated during feeding time; albeit, Leonard was a "tip-top" man in his calling, straight as an arrow in all his dealings, and retiring in his domestic demeanour. His heart and soul seemed devoted in "picking out" (using his own words) any unusual family disturbance or rejoicings that

affected the Townsend surroundings, and he was not altogether himself if he could not attain his object; but it should be recorded that any knowledge Leonard possessed was never abused by being used to the disadvantage of the family with whom he had spent a whole lifetime. He was devoted to his young mistress; he had nursed her for hours when quite an infant. There was not a spot on the Carthewin estate he had not rambled over, leading her Welsh mountain pony "Rattler" from valley to hill, through rugged defiles and precipitous places; listening to her prattling young tongue, and, in return, telling the child pleasant little fairy tales; sheltering her with his long Macgregor's plaid, when the rude winterly wind swept down upon his "Rosebud," as he called her; and at other times screening her delicate face from the scorching rays of a burning mid-day summer's sun. But Leonard invariably brought

his little charge safely home to the arms of her parent. No wonder Nora was so profoundly attached to the old man, with whom she had been so long associated when a child. If a joy had been torn from her, appertaining to some trifling matter, the little Nora would run, with her eyes full of tears, to poor old Leonard, and pour out her complaint with sobs ; then Leonard would run away with her in his arms, or whip her up on his shoulder, carry her to the servants' hall, and soothingly endeavour to subdue her tears. All these circumstances are pleasant reminiscences to our heroine, naturally causing her to feel devoted to the faithful servant.

“Anything special in the mail-bag this morning, Godfrey?” said Mrs Townsend, vacantly looking into the teapot, the cover of which she closed with some emphasis.

“No — yes ; at least, nothing particular,”

responded Mr Townsend, wrenching a French roll asunder with determination.

“That’s a crammer!” said Leonard, within himself.

“No—yes; at least, nothing particular,” replied Mrs Townsend, in a mimicking tone. “Those are very ambiguous terms. Judging from your absence of mind, I should say that there is something very special in your correspondence this morning.”

Leonard, finding the conversation drifting into matters of a private character, bit his lip, and left the room.

“If there is anything very edifying, father, I vote you let us share in your overflow of joy,” said that little tease Gertrude.

Nora was seemingly busy in scraping the merry-thought bone of a chicken that was on her plate, in an abstracted manner; she caught sight of the unmistakable caligraphy, also the crest on the envelope, and the black-

edged border on the enclosure ; she also saw her father cover the letter with his serviette, when Leonard handed the omelette : it was suggestive of some important communication ; yes, the crest was familiar to her (a lion rampant) ; she wondered what on earth could be the purport of the letter that so visibly affected her parent. Every mail-bag for months past had been watched by her with intense anxiety. An irresistible something, which she could not easily describe, seemed to surround her ; joys she could not reasonably anticipate were far from her thoughts ; her cup of sorrow was still full to overflowing. She inwardly felt that, sooner or later, stirring events connected in some way with her lamented Percy, her brave hero, must reach her with overwhelming force, as she scarcely dare venture another look at her father, who sat at the bottom of the table absorbed in his pile of correspondence, one of which she knew, in her own

heart, contained information that concerned her, and her alone. A still small voice, as it were, breathed into her soul. Was it the voice of the dead or the voice of the living,—the voice of the ideal man that she had pictured in her mind from time to time, the dearest associate of her late beloved husband, the very being who closed her Percy's eyes in death. She felt the day was fast approaching when he would appear in their midst, and disclose to her personally the thrilling scene that concluded the last chapter of her husband's life. "Come when it may," she often said within herself, "I will hail its advent with courage, and fortify myself with the firmest resolution."

"Godfrey, dear," ventured Mrs Townsend, "what on earth has happened? Are the Three per Cents. gone to nothing, or—"

"Hang the Three per Cents.!" replied Mr Townsend, somewhat snappishly, thrusting

the batch of correspondence into the breast-pocket of his frieze coat.

“I don’t think it would be very flourishing for the inmates of Carthewin Castle, if they were hanged, as you call it,” said Mrs Townsend, “seeing that a great deal of our capital is invested therein. It would simply mean a wiping out of my jointure, and rags and starvation for us all.”

“You take my words literally, Julia.”

“Really I can’t, for the life of me, make you out one bit this morning,” replied Mrs Townsend, looking askance at Nora.

That look !

“Never mind, dear mamma,” at last ventured Nora tremulously ; “papa has some little secret he is anxious, no doubt, to impart to you ; maybe he will disclose it when we adjourn. Come, Gerty, fold your serviette, and let us be off.”

“Fiddlesticks !” said Mrs Townsend.

“Secret indeed! I detest the term. My dear father Rodway looked upon secrets as odious, and I am the same way of thinking;—too many secrets going on in this castle by half.”

“I vote we make immediate tracks, Nora; it is getting hot,” suggested Gertrude, going over to her father, kissing him, and saying,—“Mind, dad, don’t you go putting off Strawworth and the Branscomb girls, for I shall be intensely disgusted if you do.”

“Hang the Branscomb girls, and Strawworth too!” said Mr Townsend vehemently.

At this juncture Nora and Gertrude left the room, not relishing the present state of things.

“Supremely interesting conversation, certainly,” ventured Mrs Townsend, with stinging sarcasm. “The Three per Cents., the very main-spring and prop of our existence, are to be ignominiously hanged, and our rector’s

good daughters, together with the highly-gifted, self-denying, and talented curate, he also is to suffer death by the same process."

"Talented!" mimicked Mr Townsend sceptically, who could no longer resist the temptation of putting down such eulogium.

"Yes, talented," replied Julia; "if double first at mathematics and double first at Greek mean anything."

The observation made by Godfrey Townsend showed at once the chaotic tumult of his mind. Such an outpouring of invectives towards a man Mrs Townsend was desirous of securing as a *fiancé* for Gertrude was, to use the mildest expression, appalling, and filled her mind with the most dismal forebodings as to the future, in connection with her daughter. To think that Godfrey Townsend should put his foot down in the very peremptory manner he did, was more than the highly-sensitive nature of Julia could bear.

“Notwithstanding your unfeeling and, I venture to assert, uncharitable remarks, Godfrey, concerning a young and promising curate who is pushing himself into more and more usefulness in our parish; I repeat, in spite of your remarks, I have every confidence in the Rev. Mr Strawworth, and I look to his acquitting himself in the duties of life with undeviating rectitude.”

“Perhaps misplaced,” replied Mr Townsend, with an air of considerable preoccupation, at the same time searching in his breast coat-pocket for a letter, which he produced with an air of gravity, and handed it to his wife to read.

“I trust, Godfrey dear,” said Mrs Townsend, in her softest accents, “there is nothing alarming in this letter, as my nerves of late have become so unstrung by a concatenation of events, that I am in no humour just now to subject myself to any process which

will have the effect of prostrating me entirely."

"On the contrary, Julia, that letter in your hands, if I mistake not, will, or should, have the opposite effect, by reviving, instead of depressing, your nervous system."

"Anyhow," continued Mrs Townsend, adjusting her gold eyeglasses, "it caused a very considerable tumult in your system, else you would not, I am sure, have displayed a temper in the presence of your daughters such as, I trust, we shall never experience again."

"For the future," replied Mr Townsend, "I shall contrive to open all my letters in the library, and thus avoid a repetition of the display to which you refer, but of which I was not conscious."

"As you like," said Mrs Townsend petulantly, scrutinising the motto, "*Servabo fidem*;" then unfolding a full-size sheet of

letter-paper, with a very wide margin, read as follows :—

“THE ‘WOODLANDS,’ GLO’STERSHIRE

“DEAR SIR,—Having just returned from the Crimea invalided, I avail myself of the earliest opportunity of communicating with you, in accordance with the dying wish of the late Lieutenant Snowden, who fell after greatly distinguishing himself at the battle of ——.

“As the despatches of the commander-in-chief bear testimony to the exceptional services of this distinguished officer, it is obviously out of place and idle for me to make any reference to them, other than observing that I have to deplore the loss of not only one of the ablest of soldiers who fell for his country, but I am proud to be able to record that he was a very dear personal friend of mine own, whose

sterling worth and pious memory it is my good fortune to revere.

“As I was deputed by the late Lieutenant Snowdon, in his last moments, to solicit an interview with your daughter, and deliver into her hands some effects which he greatly prized, I have to ask (should it meet with your approval) if you will obligingly fix a place and day most convenient to yourself and daughter on which I can discharge the sorrowful duty entrusted to me.

“With the most profound sympathy for you and yours, I am, dear sir, your obedient servant,

OLIVER GREY,

“Captain, —th Regiment.”

“A better-expressed letter I never read,” said Mrs Townsend, after a short pause, “and, I should think, supremely sincere. I have heard several officers speak of Captain Grey in the highest terms, not only in connec-

tion with the war, in which he greatly distinguished himself, but also in connection with a most charming girl, who volunteered in the service of the 'Red Cross.' Why, surely you must recollect meeting her at one of my garden-parties at Rodway Hall—little Gipsy Constance, as we called her, daughter of my lamented father's old friend Podmore Templar, of 'Brookfield'?"

"Now you call my attention to it," replied Mr Townsend, "I have an indistinct recollection of meeting Miss Templar, and at the time I was very much struck with her beauty and strikingly refined manner. But in what way is she connected with Captain Oliver Grey?"

"From what I can gather," replied Mrs Townsend, "Captain Grey was seriously wounded, and was subsequently removed from the theatre of war (a most unusual proceeding) to some farm-house in the im-

mediate neighbourhood, where it appears Miss Templar, in the capacity of her calling, most tenderly nursed the gallant captain through a long and dangerous illness. Curiously enough, when Captain Grey got better, poor little Constance succumbed to an attack of fever, probably the outcome of intense fatigue consequent on night watching. Naturally enough, the most profound intimacy sprung up between the invalids ; and I should not be at all surprised if one of the heroes of that memorable charge at —— and black-eyed Constance did not appear at the hymeneal altar to answer for some pledge of affection contracted in that Russian homestead, under very exceptional, and, I may say, sensational circumstances. But I am digressing. What are your views with respect to this said letter, Godfrey dear ?”

“ Views ?”

“Yes.”

“What are yours, love? You know of old that two heads are better than one,” answered Mr Townsend, seizing the poker and hammering a large lump of coal on the fire into sundry pieces.

“Naturally enough,” said Mrs Townsend, “I am desirous of falling in with your views, as the matter at issue more directly affects your daughter.”

“Nay, Julia, we are one, you know, and all our best and happiest intentions should be in common with each other,—bound up, so to speak, in one volume, by the same author.”

“You are a dear, Godfrey, to so forcibly express sentiments that are entirely my own; but I leave the reply in your hands.”

“And,” continued Mr Townsend, “I will most religiously discharge any duty that may be entrusted to me with undeviating honour and unflinching integrity. *Apropos*

of this letter, which necessarily demands a prompt and most courteous reply, we cannot, I think, do better than first of all submit it, without one word of remark, to Nora, and hear what she has to say on the subject, in which she is intimately concerned."

"I should not be surprised to hear that Nora objects to accord Captain Grey a personal interview, and at the eleventh hour will leave the dismals in your hands to manipulate," replied Mrs Townsend, caressing one of her favourite poodles.

"I don't think anything of the kind, Julia."

"Well, we shall see, dear," interrupted Mrs Townsend. "If you think it will avail anything, or, in other words, that better results will follow, I will, with your permission, break the news to Nora in a gentle manner, and at the earliest favourable moment."

“Not for the world, Julia,” replied Mr Townsend, with considerable earnestness. “I have the pulse of my child beating so near my heart, that I intuitively know how to feel it. Leave the matter in my hands, and I will arrange for the best results, by placing it in higher hands. He who tempers the wind to the shorn lamb, will accommodate the yoke that my beloved girl has to bear.”

Mrs Townsend bent her head submissively, and thus broke up the *tête-à-tête*.

The sun is shining brightly on the dew-drops, which hang like sparkling cascades of light on the various groups of plants in the shrubbery; the sweet odours from the highly-scented briar trees and various flowers in the borders, speak their own language, denoting the time of year.

Although many birds have ceased to sing their morning and evening song to their

nestlings, there are other feathered tribes who fill the air with their delicious notes ! The grand landscape in the distance, melting far away into glorious indistinctness ; the sunlight which lights up the purple moorland ; the tall barley and the oat stalks on the sidelands, swaying to and fro at every gentle gust of wind, like the ripple of the troubled waves at sea, attract the lover of nature, and open up a fountain of unspeakable joy in a heart and soul for such reality and splendour, all bursting forth with uncommon beauty !

“ Well, old girl,” said Mr Townsend, as he stepped from the tessellated pavement on the terrace into the open French window leading to the library, at the same time smashing a flower-pot containing mignonette, which he dragged off a stand with the tail of his frieze coat, “ I have been looking for you in every direction, high and low.

First I went to the stables, then the lodges, and heaven knows where—”

“And found me at last,” interrupted Nora, “in the place of all others where I am most likely to be found, amongst these tiers, I may say acres, of dusty books, where I am always so happy; for you know how I love to seek a pastime, dear father, the pleasure of which is not only great, but lasting.”

“True, true, old girl; but I must get you out of this humdrum mode of pastime. More air, more exercise, and less brooding over old scores, as the saying is, will suit the book of your life better, and bring some of the damask again in your poor little pale face.”

Nora looked so picturesque this morning, so real, so much more like herself; she flushed with pleasure and warm feeling when she took the large brown hand of her

father in hers, and lifting it to her lips said, —“How good God has been to spare you to me; how thankful and supremely happy should I be, in the possession of a parent so devoted.” And throwing her eyes towards heaven she softly exclaimed,—“God knows all things, He knows that I am thankful.”

“Look here, old girl,” said Mr Townsend, turning his massive head away, and hiding it in one of the gaps in the book range, to disguise a bumping tear that had promiscuously started, “drop all this nonsense. You are too sensitive by half. It upsets yourself and everyone else. Put your foot down resolutely, my child; be determined to grapple with what may seem to you unendurable trouble and crushing difficulties, which, in reality, are but pleasures in disguise. Sooner or later you will come upon the keynote to all of it, and you will remember your father’s words.”

“To view things, dear father, philosophically, is sound and wholesome advice, but how hard sometimes to accomplish !”

“It ultimately becomes harder if we do not,” said Mr Townsend. “Perhaps what I have ventured has not the proper ring in it; but you know precisely what I mean, and how earnestly and affectionately I long to see you your own dear self again, the very counterpart of your lamented mother.”

At this point Nora strangled a sob in her throat, as she twisted, in a preoccupied manner, a small bunch of seals between her fingers.

“But now to domestic matters, little woman. I received a letter this morning from—”

“Captain Oliver Grey,” interrupted Nora, with a firm voice.

“How do you know?” said Mr Townsend, in amazement.

“I caught sight of the crest on the envelope at the breakfast-table.”

“How do you know the crest?” asked Mr Townsend, a little suspiciously.

“Captain Grey forwarded me a letter a long time since from my beloved husband, which, it appears, he was directed to do if anything should happen to Percy. There is the envelope,” said our heroine, producing it.

“Did Captain Grey write any letter himself?”

“None whatever,” said Nora; “not one word of his was contained in that cover; had he done so, I should most certainly have handed it to you.”

“I know you would; and now, child, read this communication which I received to-day,” said Mr Townsend, patting his daughter gently on the cheek and presenting Captain Grey’s letter; then throwing himself carelessly on the sofa, he took up the newspaper.

Nora tremblingly unfolded the large foolscap, carefully read and re-read it, whilst her small right foot tattooed the ground with nervous agitation; then walking to the window, she looked out over the vast expanse of country, in deep and anxious meditation.

“Well, little woman,” ventured Mr Townsend, after a long pause, and looking over his glasses, expecting to find his daughter sorely stricken with sudden grief, “what shall I say in reply?”

Mr Townsend had not seen his daughter look so unemotional for some time past. A change seemed to have come o’er “the spirit of her dream.” With a steady step she approached her father, and with a firm voice said complacently,—

“I leave the reply, papa, entirely in your hands.”

“Precisely; that is just what your mother has done; but as it is a matter which more

directly concerns yourself, I would rather hear your views on the subject."

"My views should be identical with yours," replied Nora, with an embarrassed sigh.

"Hardly, dear," said her father.

"I should be happier in the belief that such is a fact," continued Nora.

"Jewel," said Mr Townsend, within himself.

"Well, Nora, I shall write to Captain Grey to-day, and invite him to the Castle for a week or two. I, for one, shall be proud to make the acquaintance of an officer who has so much distinguished himself during the late campaign, and delighted to offer the hospitality of our home to the personal friend of your late brave husband. Your cousin Cuthbert is coming here on Monday week, and I hear that Mrs Townsend has invited Miss Constance Templar, who was on the staff of the Red Cross, to spend a

short time with us. I am also given to understand from Mrs Townsend that this lady nursed Captain Grey during a long illness in the Crimea; and, by-the-bye, very nearly lost her life into the bargain—at least, so the report goes; therefore I think it will be a capital idea, and but kind, to have them here at the same time—that is, if it be agreeable to Mrs Townsend, in which case we shall be a merry party. You know Miss Templar, do you not?”

“I can hardly say I know her,” replied Nora. “I have just the faintest recollection of meeting her at Rodway Hall, before you married mamma.”

“I do not think,” continued Mr Townsend, “any person who once met Miss Templar could easily forget her. She was then marvellously handsome and supremely intelligent, perhaps a little too much so. An eminent lawyer once remarked he had ‘no objection

to blue stockings, provided the petticoats were long enough to conceal them'; but as to her beauty, using a vulgar phrase, first-rate was a fool to it!"

Nora smiled complacently at the flow of her father's mirth.

"Do these arrangements fall in with your views, Nora? Say the word, and I will agitate the goose-quill instantler, and invite Captain Grey."

"What are the wishes of Mrs Townsend, papa?"

"I will arrange all that. The long and the short of the matter is, I have had a conversation with your mother, and she has left the preliminaries to me."

"If it meet, sir, with—"

"Hang the 'sir'! drop it, Nora, you know how I hate the term!"

"If it meet, dearest father," continued Nora, "with your and Mrs Townsend's pleas-

ure to invite Captain Grey to the Castle, I am more than delighted at the prospect of seeing the very man, of all others, who was the devoted friend of my dear Percy."

At this point Nora buried her face in her hands and sobbed.

"Look here, little woman," said Mr Townsend, pulling himself together with a lofty demeanour, "you won't be making a little fool of yourself when Captain Grey arrives, will you?"

"Good heavens! father, what do you mean?"

"What I mean is this. You know that I am given to plain speaking. You will not, when Captain Grey *does* come, be going off into hysterics, doing the sensational, kicking up a precious bother, and all that sort of thing?"

Nora's eyes flashed fire at the conclusion of her father's remark; a keen observer

could have detected a thrill that vibrated through her frame, as she crested her head and said,—

“When the time comes, I trust I shall know how to govern my feelings, befitting the daughter of Godfrey Townsend. Though a widow, and smarting under the blow that Providence has so heavily dealt me, nevertheless I have a soul that rises triumphantly in the knowledge that I bear the name of my departed hero, whose undying memory I shall ever revere.”

After a long pause, she continued,—

“Forget that love so pure, which springs from your fond heart, my father! rebel against your commands! such shall never be again said. May I live to make your declining years full of joy and peace.”

Mr Townsend, entwining his arms around his child, and fondly embracing her, said,—

“May that guidance which comes from

heaven be your support through life," and, with a measured tread, he passed out of the room.

Nora listened to the retreating footsteps of her parent as they died away in the corridor which led to the billiard-room, then throwing herself into the lounging-chair, she could no longer suppress her tears. They were not tears of sadness—but rather, tears of joy!—tears that not unfrequently relieve the heart from a sense of oppression, that ease, as it were, the soul of a mighty weight, and clear the brain of dismal surroundings—yes, a pious woman's tears often a sweet harbinger of coming joys. May such be our heroine's portion! Nora now began to seriously consider the position of affairs. During the conversation with her father, she could not realise the precise features of the case, which now faintly dawned upon her and became more and more developed.

“Can it be possible,” she said within herself, “that I shall so soon stand face to face with the man of all others I long to converse with, to see the colleague and devoted friend of my Percy. The letter that my husband wrote me about him has been before my eyes, as it were, every hour in the day; how I longed to show it to my father, but there was so much in it of an absolutely private character, it would have been madness in me to have disclosed the contents.” Thus Nora soliloquised, when snatches of a lively song in the corridor denoted Gertrude’s approach, as she sang—

“Awake the heavens, look bright my dear,
It is never too late for delight, my dear;
The best of all ways to lengthen our days
Is to steal a few hours in the night, my dear.”

Nora hastily brushed away a promiscuous tear that hung on her long lashes, when her step-sister tripped like a fairy into the

library, with an apronful of the choicest hot-house flowers, and a face radiant with glowing health, exclaiming,—

“Goodness gracious! why dear Miss—I beg pardon, Mrs Moping—why, having it all to yourself again. I thought I should find you here,—should not be at all surprised, one fine morning, to see you suddenly converted into *Gibbon’s Decline and Fall*, stuck upon the book-range, neatly bound in calf; nay, Sissy dear, don’t look cross,—anything serious the matter?”

“Oh dear no. If I look cross, dear Gerty, I feel just the reverse, for I am happier to-day than I have been for some time.”

“Hurrah! I vote you come out for a ride with me this morning, may be the fresh air will get rid of some of the redness I espy in your eyes, and wake you up a few; besides,” added she archly, “mamma will be waking you up if you stay here, and no

error. Come, Sissy, let us be off for a scamper over the moorlands. ‘Single Peeper’ is as fresh as paint; she has not been out of the stable for a week, and if I don’t try and take it out of her, she will be taking some unwarrantable liberty with me, and will try her best to deposit me in the hedge-row.”

“I hope she will have better manners, Gerty; I am in no humour to witness such a display of her agility,” replied Nora. “Anyhow, I am good for a hard gallop this morning. Tell Harvey to have the roan saddled and brought round at twelve o’clock, and to prepare himself to accompany us.”

“You dear Sissy,” screamed the excitable and impulsive Gertrude, “why, what has come to you? it makes me so happy to see you happy,” and selecting a sprig of heliotrope from her store, she adjusted it on her step-sister’s bosom.

“I am always cheerful with you, darling,” said Nora: “I could not be otherwise; but sad grief, my child, cannot enter the heart without leaving some shadow behind it.”

“I know you have had more than your share of sorrow; but now let some of it fly out of the window, and the rest up the smoky chimney, then hurrah! we will have more pleasure together in one week than we have experienced for the last twelve months. Papa and mamma are so anxious about your health, and ‘moping,’ as the latter calls it. I say, Sissy, cousin Cuthbert is coming the week after next, and I have a holiday, and curly Cuth is so awfully jolly.”

“Don’t, dear Gerty, use that term.”

“What, not awfully jolly? why, Mr Strawworth, who ought to be an authority, says it like ‘anything.’”

“Notwithstanding the source from which

you learnt it, I affectionately submit to you that it is a fast way of speaking."

Gertrude (all smiles), with a mock curtsy, promised to say something slower for the future ; continuing,—“ Well, I said just now, cousin is coming, and he will wake me up. For my own part, I verily believe the lot of us have been fast asleep for the last ten months, ever since your poor dismals put us to bed, and covered us up with wet blankets !”

“ I have no doubt, Gerty, Mr Rodway will add his quota to the general fund of any amusement that may be going on,” replied Nora, with a slight shudder, for she had visions of what may be in store for her.

“ Lor’ bless me ! Sissy, what a funny look you gave then,” said Gertrude.

“ Nonsense, child !” replied Nora. “ You have a wonderful flow of ideas ; you are simply incomparable.”

“ Mamma informed me this morning that

she had sent an invitation to a Miss Templar to spend a week or so with us ; do you know anything of her ? How I hate your strangers, they are sometimes so ‘ stuck up.’ ”

“ I remember seeing her at Rodway Hall when a child,” said Nora ; “ she was then the prettiest *debutante* of the season.”

“ Really ! what a swell she must be now ; waltzes, I suppose, like ‘ anything ;’ talks like evermore ; dresses like Cinderella. She will take the shine out of us poor little Carthewiners ! By-the-bye, mamma says she is ‘ strictly county,’ or she should not have asked her to the Castle.”

“ I wish your mamma would cease to apply such a silly appellation to one’s friends. There are really good members of society, not strictly county, as she calls them, who are infinitely more valuable, and their friendship more lasting than the ‘ upper ten’ to whom she refers.”

“But mamma prides herself on it, don’t you know. I have heard her argue the point with papa repeatedly—indeed, it was only this morning, when she was talking about the visit of Captain Grey, which, by-the-bye, is fixed for next week, that she alluded to it.”

“And what did papa say,” ventured Nora, colouring deeply.

“He said, ‘Hang the county!’ in rather a pet, I thought, and, at the same time, threw his tobacco-pouch at mamma’s poodle, which made both ‘Snap’ and mother very angry. But don’t you speak of it, dear, for the world; I rushed into the conservatory, where I had a good laugh all to myself. I fancy papa has lately been very irritable, but he is kind and good, and I do love him so; indeed, there isn’t a soul in the village who wouldn’t lay down his life for grandfather, as they jocosely call him, for his hand is always in

his pocket to help the sick and poor ; and as for cook, she says it is a farce our keeping a model dairy at the home farm,—we had better call it the refuge for the destitute.”

“ May God spare him to us, my child, for many years, to contribute to the wants of the needy. He has ample means, and to spare, and to extend that bounty, is the most precious prerogative of the rich. But he is a man who will not be imposed upon, and, therefore, exercises much discretion in dispensing his gifts of charity. Now let us run upstairs and slip into our habits, for Harvey and the groom will be at the door with the horses in ten minutes.”

“ Please, miss—beg pardon, I should say ma’m,” said Leonard, “ do you lunch at home to-day ? ”

“ No, Leonard ; ask your mistress, when she returns from the rectory, to kindly

excuse us, as Miss Gertrude and I are going over the moorlands and on to Beech Valley ; after that we shall take luncheon at the abbey, but we shall be home in good time for dinner," said Nora.

"I think I heard you say, ma'm, that you were going to ride the roan mare."

"Yes, Leonard ; lovely morning for a gallop."

"For God's sake be careful, ma'm. I hope, no offence, but she nearly kicked off Harvey and the stud-groom yesterday ; awfully skittish, sure enough, buck jumps like anything, ma'm."

"I am generally part and parcel of the saddle when I am 'up,' Leonard," said Nora.

"Yes, ma'm, but 'tisn't very refreshing to be part and parcel of the earth, when you are down, ma'm."

"True, Leonard, true," replied Nora smilingly ; "but the poet says,—

‘Earth walks on earth like glittering gold ;
Earth says to earth we are both mould ;
Earth builds on earth castles and towers ;
Earth says to earth all shall be ours,’ ”

and our heroine bounded up the polished oak staircase with a light step and heart lighter than usual.

Leonard’s eyes followed his young mistress as she ran up the corridor and frisked round the gallery, then turning into the dining-room, said within himself,—“ Lord love her dear heart ! ”

CHAPTER XV.

HOME AGAIN.

“Home is the sacred refuge of our life,
Secured from all approaches but a wife.”

Dryden.

“SURE, then, I am delighted to have the honour of calling ye major instead of captain,” said Curtis, when he took up my hot water, and was busily engaged in the dressing-room arranging boots, spurs, clothes, etc., at the Woodlands, in Gloucestershire—the seat of my father, or the “Cotton Lord,” as he was jocosely dubbed.

“I wouldn’t,” continued Curtis, “go back again to that dismal old barn in Russia for all creation ; and sure it is

a wonder yer honour didn't leave yer bones there."

"You will simply go where I take you, Curtis. Recollect you are now my special property, and you have nothing whatever to do with Her Majesty's service."

"Thank the Lord for all His mercies," replied my valet; "and, more particularly, I thank Him for putting it into yer honour's head to buy a poor miserable fellow like myself out. Sure then, ye shall never have reason to regret it."

"You deserved it, Curtis, else I should have sent you again to the front as a target to be shot at!"

"Sure, then, my poor Biddy, my pretty shamrock of old Ireland, would have been a lonely widow, and—"

"You probably better off," I interrupted.

"In the kingdom that is to come, yer honour; anyhow, I have no particular

desire to make the exchange just at present, whilst my Biddy and I have such good quarters in the east lodge, and our two little ragged rascals are climbing about on our knees."

"Then you really are happy?" I asked, at the same time scraping away with my razor with a hand not the most steady.

"Happy, did ye say? happy isn't the word for it, Major. If you only will be so kind as to pay Biddy and me a visit at the lodge, your keen eyes will soon take in the measure of our happiness. It isn't strike measure, yer honour, it's full measure well pressed down."

"Then your wife, Curtis, has no particular desire to make tracks, and cross again from Holyhead to Dublin and take up her abode again on the Tipperary hills?" jocosely.

"Not for all the potatoes in the county,

sir ; anyhow, not so long as my dear master will give my Biddy and her chicks shelter in his lodge, and employ these willing hands to serve him. Yes, just so long will Mike Curtis remain a faithful servant till death parts us ; sure then, 'tis gospel what I say, every word of it."

"You have hitherto, Curtis, proved yourself to be a faithful servant. Your future success will now very much depend upon your own exertions. Your life, in every respect, will be a very different one to that which you have been accustomed. You have much to learn in your new vocation ; you are yet comparatively young, willing, able, and I have always found you truthful ; you have only to continue in the same groove, and you and Biddy will have your reward. As my valet and personal attendant in all shooting, fishing, and hunting expeditions, your duties will

not be heavy: on the contrary, they will be light; but there is one thing I must caution you against, and that is, disclosing to the employés of this establishment, or anyone else, the knowledge that you are in possession of in connection with the surroundings of our late residence in Russia, and those persons with whom you have seen me associated. For were I to know that you had made a fool of yourself in this respect, out of my employ you go like 'a shot out of a gun.'"

"Faith, master, I had better never have been born, except to be shot, were I to pay ye such a bastely compliment as to spake of any matter that concerned ye, and that didn't concern me at all, at all. Mum is the word with Mike Curtis, from sunrise to sundown; not even my own darling Biddy shall ever know one word from me—unless I spake out in my sleep, and

the little spalpain monkey is sleeping like the 'Bristolians,' with one eye open!"

"I have named this matter to you to-day, Curtis, to put you well on your guard, as it is not improbable that I may have to take you into Wales with me in a day or two."

"Into Wales, Major!" said Curtis, with some surprise; "sure, then, I am glad to hear it, for another little change, maybe, will brighten ye up a bit, for ye haven't looked quite so well lately; and sure, if ye have anything on yer mind, maybe ye can unbosom it better in some other part of the country," significantly.

"You are an oddity, Curtis,—certainly a very curious compound. What on earth makes you think I have something on my mind?" I replied, feeling a little uneasy, not knowing what my servant was "driving" at.

“I never said I thought you had, Major ; I only said if you had. Sure enough, whenever I and Biddy had anything on our minds, a long times since, we used to go to Father O'Connor to relieve us of all imperfections ; but now we have no father-confessor here, and we must do the best we can. But sure, then, ye haven't looked well—ye are not yerself at all, at all ; and all these fine dinner parties, and dancing from sunset until sunrise, is playing the very ‘Bear’ with ye ; and the sooner ye get out of it and go into Wales the better. Maybe ye will be so kind as to be after telling me what things I am to pack up for yer use, and for how long ye are going to stay ?”

“Probably for a fortnight, Curtis, maybe more. I have an invitation to go to Carthewin Castle.”

Curtis knew perfectly well some of the

history attached to Carthewin Castle, in connection with the late Lieutenant Snowdon, and he was also keenly alive to the fact that I was intimately mixed up in some way with important matters which I had to discharge; he knew also of the likeness of Nora which I wore, and often pondered over the whole concatenation of events. Though of late I had become exceedingly reticent, and very thoughtful when any circumstance "cropped" up relating to the late Lieutenant Snowdon, or his secret marriage with Miss Townsend—which marriage was freely discussed by the domestic employés of the Woodlands—it was now no secret in Wales; indeed the *Pembrokeshire Flying Post* (which paper, by-the-by, was not of the same politics as Godfrey Townsend), delighted at the opportunity afforded for a spicy bit of scandal, and devoted a long paragraph to

a "mysterious elopement and secret marriage in connection with a certain heiress not a hundred miles from the baronial residence of Carthewin Castle." A copy of this paper had been forwarded to some officer in the Crimea, who passed it on to me before I left the country. Curtis had seen the paper, made a mental of its contents, and subsequently, on his return to England, the whole of the puzzle was unravelled. No one knew better than Curtis what was passing in the mind of myself; he also knew how attached Miss Templar was to me—perhaps more than he cared to express. When at the Russian farm, he picked up a portion of Miss Templar's very ample diary, and was mean enough to read it, and, be it said to his shame, retain it; but, as a redeeming point in the fatal act, be it also said, that he never divulged the contents of that diary to a living soul.

“Sure alive, ye are going to a grand old place, Major. I have often heard that dashing officer, Lieutenant Snowdon, spake about the miles of park, and the deer and the hunting and shooting and—”

A pause.

“The what?” I asked, noticing a peculiar twitch in my servant’s face, which he had when anything unusual happened and exposed a sensitive nerve.

“Oh, nothing, master,” continued Curtis, making another face all awry.

“Come, come, Curtis, you meant to say something; I am curious to know what it was, so out with it.”

“Well, sir, if ye must know, I was that moment thinking of the blessed little angel of a girl that our dear lieutenant used to talk about in the Crimea; and sure haven’t I seen him many a time seize the brandy-flask when sitting over the camp-fire, and

drink to 'Our sweethearts and wives'; and haven't I seen a red patch climb up into both cheeks; and sure, haven't I seen one of the biggest tears steal out of an eye that ten thousand Russian bayonets could not have started; sure, then, I have, and no mistake. Yes, I was thinking of it all, yer honour, and the dear little woman that maybe is pining away on that great estate. Yes, sure, like my blessed Biddy would on the Tipperary hills, if Mike Curtis had found a stray shot in one of his lungs, and to follow six feet of narrow soil for his dwelling!"

"Well, my good fellow," I replied, touched by the earnestness and simplicity of my servant's remarks, "you will very shortly have an opportunity of seeing the 'little angel of a girl,' as you call her, when you accompany me to Carthewin."

"And sure, Major, haven't I seen her shadow many a time, tucked up under your

flannen waistcoat in the little gold locket," said Curtis, *sotto voce*, and looking round towards the doors to see that no one was within hearing.

"Mum's the word, Curtis; do you hear me? Have a care, the walls sometimes have ears. I know nothing of Mrs Snowdon; I am simply going to Carthewin to hand over the property of the late Lieutenant Snowdon, which is now in a portmanteau in the strong room. The butler will give it to you on the morning of our departure; and mind, I again caution you to keep your confounded 'whip' still over all matters appertaining to the Carthewin or any other family."

"Sure, then, I would sooner suffer death, master, than the crack of my whip should be heard either concerning the little Nora child, or the daisy darling of the Red Cross, who tumbled over head and ears in love with ye—and she did, sure, and no mistake."

“Very well, I rely upon you. If you fail to act up to my instructions, you may depend upon my sending you off at a moment’s notice. And now you can go. Get the guns in readiness for the 1st September, for I shall take them with me, as I may probably require them before I return.”

“Very good, Major,” and with the usual salute, Curtis left the room; but returning in a few moments, he said, “I omitted to tell ye, sir, that ‘Rob Roy’ has his shoes off, and he is up to his knees in tan in the colt’s loose box. And sure, then, he is beginning to pick up his crumbs in fine form; and I hope, Major, in a month’s time, to see him the pink of perfiction again.”

“I am exceedingly glad to hear it,” I replied. “You know how fond I am of the animal.”

“Sure, then, ye have reason to be, for

he landed ye high and dry amidst the hottest shower of lead that ever rained upon a mass of struggling men. The vete'nary says he has more bullets now in him, and he has extracted four already. Faith ! he was riddled like a cullender from stem to stern ; and, by the powers ! if it isn't a riddle to me how he scrambled through it at all. And with the bullet-holes in your helmet, sir, it is a providence that ye are spared to your father and mother, and a blessing to Biddy and me."

"I hope for some good end, Curtis," I replied. "At present, I don't see that I have done much in this world."

"And it isn't my good master that is a judge of anything of the kind," replied Curtis, turning upon his heel again.

The "Woodlands" is a newly-erected mansion, built strictly in the Tudor style, the architecture of that period being maintained

in detail throughout the establishment. It is most amply furnished in old oak, connoisseurs having for years been employed collecting in all parts of England the choicest specimens that could be found, regardless of cost.

The small but very picturesque estate comprises about five hundred acres in a ring fence, on which formerly stood an old-fashioned red - brick mansion, which the "Cotton Lord" razed to the ground. The present edifice is erected on a promontory overlooking one of the most beautiful valleys in the county. The park in front of the mansion is enriched by a wealth of gigantic trees, of cedar, elm, oak, chestnut, and lime. The verdant slopes from the house are most artistically laid out, and abound with rhododendrons, which, in their season, form one blaze of colour, beautifully contrasting with the greensward beneath. On the east side of the park there are some

precipitous waterfalls, the white spray dashing from rock to rock roaring monotonously, and terminating in a broad lake in the valley, where it silently flows on under the long shadows of the trees, watering, in its various outlets, the surrounding lowlands.

Few moments awaken keener pleasure than that of revisiting scenes of our youth after a long absence. The trees, the flowers, the water dashing in mad career from boulder to boulder, and even the wood-pigeons, seem long-lost friends.

As I stood on the edge of a precipice, where, as a boy, I used to climb with all the vigour of health and childish enthusiasm, I recalled to my mind early scenes of happiness experienced in every crag and spot on the estate, and sighed within me for a return of those enchanting pleasures, which have passed away in the

effluxion of time, alas ! never again to return. Look where I would, old familiar, loving faces seemed, as it were, to peep at me, and convey their very earliest impressions. Joys and hopes, such as I have experienced, seemed momentarily to come back with all the freshness of youth and vigour, and breathe into my soul the sound of voices of long-lost companions ; some now “slumbering on earth’s cold pillow” on the slopes of the Crimea ; others passed into different lands, north, south, east, and west ; friends grown from childhood to manhood, and following their respective vocations in the busy hum of the world. I thought, too, of the once happy, light-hearted Percy, so full of the liveliest anticipations, as we sat on this very spot and smoked our meer-schaums together not two years since, with the world before us—alas ! how soon closed upon one promising life, cut short in the

bloom. I thought, too, of his Nora, whom I was so soon to see, and the sorrowful account I may be probably called upon to render, and — no matter what! I turned from the scene so dear to me, with loving impressions of the past, and anxious thoughts for the future.

Yes, there are many reminiscences attached to the home of one's birth, that awaken in the mind early joys of youthful experience. Hopes and fears, likes and dislikes, pleasures and grief, not unfrequently appear again to one in all their vivacity, some like a beautiful dream. Look where we will, glimpses of our childhood in all its freshness stand out in the canvas, and speak, as it were, its own loving language. Every tree has its history, and tells its own sweet tale of sunshine and sadness. Every brook has its charm, and conveys with its ripple delightful moments of days long past. The

balmy odours of spring flowers come up to the senses, and unlock the door of our memory, vividly bringing to our remembrance, like a flash of lightning, the bright and happy scenes of our youth, and the dear loving faces that shared with us indescribable joys. The author says indescribable; doubtless my courteous reader can testify, from personal experience, how difficult it is to adequately convey the nearest and dearest associations of our childhood, with that enthusiasm which one inwardly feels.

George Oliver Grey, the proprietor of the "Woodlands," is a gentleman in the vale of years, or, in different words, with sixty-five winters the other side of him. He is a tall, handsome man, with a swarthy complexion,—large shocks of black hair, here and there a fleck of white. The hard lines in his face, and, at times, stern expression of countenance, with an iron smile, rather

indicate that enormous speculations in commercial transactions had left their sure and certain mark. Like the troubled sea, dashing perpetually against a rocky shore, wears it gradually and imperceptibly away, so with the mighty waves of success and non-success, that alternately disturbed the equilibrium of the affairs of George Oliver Grey. On two or three notable occasions the cotton lord, during heavy pressure consequent on a panic, when the bank discount ran high, and was at a ruinous rate, had to make fearful sacrifices, and was reduced to the brink of insolvency; but his great brain resources, his marvellous discretion, sound judgment, and indomitable pluck in the hour of peril, were his stout bulwarks of defence, and he invariably tided over appalling difficulties when other men, with less dash and prompt decision, would have succumbed. But his motto was "*Nil desperan-*

dum," and his favourite maxim, "Lying down at the bottom of a mountain will never take a man to the top." So gigantic were the speculations of the firm of Grey, Nutwell & Company, that they have been known to clear at one of the "corners" (a term known in the cotton trade) two hundred thousand pounds. On other occasions, similar losses were sustained; therefore it cannot be wondered at, that such colossal transactions came down with overwhelming force on the firm, sometimes augmenting, and at other times seriously depressing their financial position. Not unfrequently heavy contracts were entered into with foreign houses, and with the growers (long before the cotton was planted) to deliver in England at a certain quotation, and at a given date, hence the violent fluctuations in the market on the arrival of consignments, which were usually covered by bills

of exchange, and had to be taken up at maturity.

George Oliver Grey has long since retired from the firm of Grey, Nutwell & Company, having amassed a prodigious fortune. Happily for him, he had the good sense to let others step into his easy-chair in that snug counting-house in Market Square, where he had spent so many weary years working at high pressure, and where he had reaped a large harvest; then, wishing his colleagues every possible future success and a very good morning, retired to his country seat, the "Woodlands," in Gloucestershire, where we now find him spending the residue of his life in ease and affluence in the bosom of his family, which consists of his consort, two sons, and one daughter. The younger son, Stanley, was educated for the medical profession, in which, for want of application, he was lamentably

deficient, and signally failed in all his examinations, a circumstance which proved a source of great disappointment and annoyance to his father, whose hopes were centred in him, and who had the greatest detestation of seeing his son living a life of detestable idleness: much estrangement consequently ensued between them. Stanley, knowing the wealth of his father, presumed upon the situation. Born, as he said, with a silver spoon in his mouth, he cared not a "rag" about eating the bread of idleness. He knew he was his mother's favourite son, on whom he could financially lean with the most absolute confidence, and as her own jointure was large, he could always depend upon drawing for his requirements, when the quarterly allowance made by his father was exhausted. But Stanley is a handsome fellow, one of the most presentable men in the county. He is a crack shot, a

steady bat, and a good oar ; he has mingled with the world, and felt its pleasures and excitements, but underrated its dangers, consequently, on more than one occasion, fell into snares that had been laid for him (alas ! in common with many others) by designing men and women ; indeed, Stanley's wild oats produced a large crop of trouble and perplexity, which occasioned much confusion in the otherwise happy household at the Woodlands, and, as a natural result, created an ill feeling between father and son, provoking the former to serious outbursts of anger, which the ever-fond mother, blind to her boy's faults, had to subdue as best she could. But Stanley had redeeming points. Though detestably idle, he was truthful ; though a spendthrift, he would dispose of some of his coin to the poor widow and orphan, or the man of broken career ; and he would move heaven and

earth, so to speak, to get a neighbour out of trouble. These excellent traits in his character would sometimes reach the father's ear, who would say,—“Poor Stanley! with all thy faults, I love thee still.”

George Oliver Grey and the late Cuthbert Rodway of Rodway Hall, “Old Ready Money,” as he was vulgarly called, and of whom we have previously spoken, were at one time contemporaries, and saw much of each other, transacting together immense financial operations, the filthy lucre not unfrequently involving them in difficulties, and causing bitter feelings to spring up from time to time between them. Accounts had been opened by the cotton lord at Rodway's bank, closed, and re-opened; suits pressed, and actions at law contested. Old Rodway swore at one time that Grey had caused a run upon his bank, which, had it not been for his (Rodway's) immense re-

serves in Consols, which were always available at a few hours' notice, they must have stopped payment. On the other hand, Grey vowed, with an oath, that Rodway had well-nigh ruined his firm on one occasion, by not honouring an acceptance of theirs for twenty thousand pounds, at a time the cotton lord could have bought up "Old Ready Money," and (in the words of Grey) "his entire bag of tricks." Another ill-feeling sprung up in the mind of George Oliver Grey, which at this juncture should be recorded. It was the outcome of Cuthbert Rodway and his daughter Julia (then a lady of leading fashion) not having invited him and his wife to any of the swell receptions which the Rodways gave at Rodway Hall. This was, verily, a sharp thorn in the side of the cotton lord, and most offensive to his consort. A man of his wealth and position in the commercial

world, with an accomplished and beautiful wife—who hailed from a most excellent family—to be neglected and passed over in the ordinary conventionalities of society, was more than he could bear. But in the eyes of the Rodways the Greys were not considered “strictly county.” The Rodways were bankers—the Greys sold cotton: the Rodways looked down on the Greys. They (the Rodways) moved in something higher. They were proud of their social position, and expatiated on their family tree; and as the skilful angler knows how to tickle a trout, so they knew how to tickle the fancies and ingratiate themselves into the good favour of the aristocracy, particularly those who happened to have a title to their name!! But the Rodways on one occasion were very patronising, for the accomplished and beautiful daughter Julia actually sent an invitation to Mr, Mrs, and Miss

Grey to a dinner-party at Rodway Hall, which consisted of three or four second-rate merchants, their wives and fair daughters. Grey was irate—his wife, doubly distilled. There was a total absence of any of the *elite* of the neighbourhood; and to make the matter still more pointed, the Rodways, a week later, had the bad taste to issue printed invitations, emblazoned with the family arms, to the “strictly county” people. This was gall and wormwood to George Oliver Grey. He naturally felt the slight most keenly, coming immediately after their own unconventional little dinner. But the cotton lord pocketed—so to speak—the affront. In the following autumn another invitation reached the Greys, at a time when large banking transactions (favourable to the Rodways) were in operation, to which the cotton lord replied direct to old Rodway in the most ungentlemanlike manner, saying, by way of a short cut,—

“I’ll see you d—d first!”

On the same day, Grey closed his account at Rodway’s bank, withdrawing (without any previous notice) an immense floating balance that stood to the credit of Grey, Nutwell & Company; and to the day of Cuthbert Rodway’s death, they were never again friends. The loss of the best account, and the adjective contained in the cotton lord’s letter, always stuck in Rodway’s throat, which, by-the-bye, Mrs Townsend (then Julia Rodway) knew nothing of. This is obvious, by her allowing, without protest, an invitation to be sent to me to spend a fortnight at Carthewin Castle.

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“I congratulate you, my dear boy, on your attaining your majority,” said my father, as I strolled leisurely into the breakfast-parlour, greeting my mother with a morning kiss.

"Come here, my first-born son," said that fond mother of mine, adjusting her spectacles, "and let me look into your nut-brown face, and see how time is dealing with you."

"Gently, mother."

"Gently! Fie! Oliver, fie! I see indications of sleepless nights. You do not look refreshed mornings. I strongly suspect the late hours you are persistently keeping do not suit you; besides which, you are not sufficiently strong yet to mingle in the whirling vortex of society."

"Well, dear mother, we all know it is vanity and vexation of spirit, and certainly one may spend far sounder hours; but, *apropos* of keeping, as you say, bad hours, there is one thing to be said, I keep them all, dear!"

Mrs Grey compressed her lips and shook her head

"But don't be alarmed, mother," I con-

tinued. "My health is mending apace, and I am getting as happy and hearty as a sand-boy. You are aware I have a twelve-month's leave of absence, which I hope to profitably spend with you and 'Dear Sir.'"

My father, who sat in his ample arm-chair, rubbing his hands, and fixing his penetrating eyes on me, said,—

"Did you not say, Oliver, that you had received a letter from Mr Townsend of Carthewin Castle, inviting you to spend a short time there?"

Then Mr Grey projected his lower lip, a sure sign of some little tumult brewing.

"Yes, sir," I replied; "I have received an invitation, and I am very anxious to run into Wales at the earliest possible moment, and discharge a sorrowful duty entrusted to me by my late valued friend, and colleague, Lieutuenant Snowdon."

"Poor Snowdon!" interrupted Mr Grey.

“I little thought when last he sat in that very chair your mother now occupies, we should never look on his bright, happy face again! You know, Oliver, I ‘took’ to the young fellow immensely; his open-hearted, boyish ways, without a semblance of anything facial in his composition, greatly struck me; and on more than one occasion I said to your mother,—‘Mark my words, if that young fellow is spared to pull through the war, he will ultimately rise to be a great soldier.’”

“You were right, sir, in your conjecture, and you must have been a prophet,” I replied. “Though fate was against poor Percy’s career, he rose to be one of the bravest soldiers in Her Majesty’s service; yes, a hero!—a host in himself, and one whom, had he been spared, England need have been proud of, and parents rejoice over; but he fell, leading one of the grandest

charges during the campaign, and ‘died like a warrior brave.’ In him I lost a valuable friend, a pious companion, and, in every sense of the term, he was true as gold !”

“Of course, Oliver, you know all about your late friend’s secret marriage with Miss Townsend ?” said Mr Grey sympathetically.

“Yes, I am in possession of that knowledge,” I replied, feeling the warm blood tingling about my face and ears like distraction.

The cotton lord bit his lip, and vigorously made three determined thrusts at an exorbitant nob of coal in a preoccupied manner ; then suddenly pitching the poker, with much emphasis, into its place, continued,—

“Now, I must tell you, my boy, all about it. I received information from the most absolutely reliable source, that this young

fellow, your late colleague, solicited the hand and heart of Miss Townsend, to whom he was devotedly attached, and with whom he had spent much time. His suit, as far as she was concerned, was accepted. They loved each other with a tender devotion, a love well tried in the fire, tested by a thousand proofs of the most profound affection, extending over a long period, and cemented by the best and purest actions—which, after all, Oliver, speak louder than any words. But what followed? Like an honourable young man, he sought an interview with Miss Townsend's father, who, be it said, is the very paragon of a fine old English gentleman—a man beloved and highly esteemed by everyone. Snowdon, full of hope and enthusiasm, pleaded his suit. He told his tale of love with great earnestness; he went hand-in-hand with the girl of his choice to the

arms of her parent. At his footstool, so to speak, they each in turn poured forth their tale of love. Poor Snowdon was penniless. In his own words he said,—‘I have nothing but my sword and my honour to do battle with in this world, and, God willing, I will render a faithful account of both.’ It was all to no purpose. Mr Townsend, with tears in his eyes, assured Snowdon that his wife and himself had, after very mature consideration, arrived at the conclusion that he could not be accepted as the *fiancé* of their daughter, and their determination was irrevocable. Under those circumstances, and with a view to their child’s future happiness, a gentle hint was given to Snowdon that the sooner he packed his portmanteau and made tracks the better. And so the hope of those devoted beings was utterly crushed in a morning—hopes that took years in building, and bound

together with the best material, requiring but the father's blessing to make things perfect. This was hopelessly denied, and why? First, because Snowdon was not considered to be a "strictly county" man, his father having been a merchant in Yorkshire; and, secondly, because he was without a fortune, which that mercenary, stuck-up wife of Townsend's thought so much of. Egad! Oliver, that woman knows a thing or two about coin, I can tell you. She had a good schooling with her precious old father, Rodway. Bah! I hate the name! Then again she went crazy over her family tree, and 'strictly county' connections. She knew everybody's history, down to the 'peccadilloes' of people's great-grandmothers. If one met her out, she would recognise you if it suited her pleasure to do so. It has been recorded by a learned writer that, 'There is a certain class of

vulgar fine ladies, who meet you one day with a vacant stare, as if unconscious of your existence, and address you on another in a tone of impertinent familiarity.’”

And the cotton lord, at this juncture, again hit about the coals with great vehemence.

“Miss Townsend,” continued my father, “in the midst of her sorrow, read as it were between the lines. She had a clear perception that the objection to an alliance was the outcome of her stepmother’s determined opposition to a marriage which was considered sheer madness to precipitate. And now, Oliver, you have the exact history of the case, as I and your mother received it direct from Miss Townsend’s old faithful friend and governess, the Honourable Mrs Mackenzie; and, upon my soul, I have not patience to say more, for it brings to my recollection reminiscences connected with that

old blackguard Rodway, and his fair Julia, as he called her. Egad, my boy, it makes my blood boil, even now, to think of it!"

And again throwing himself into his arm-chair, Mr Grey subsided into quietness, very much to the relief of his wife, who kept frowning at him, and making manifold signs to discontinue the conversation.

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On the 25th August, a rap at my chamber door, coupled with a recognised voice, "Hot water, sir," by my valet, awoke me to a sense of the fact that the morning on which I had to set forth on my journey to Carthewin Castle had arrived. I opened my casement window and looked out on the broad expanse of country through the dim grey dawn, and welcomed the cool breeze which fanned my face, conveying, as it were, the glad tidings that the day of all others I had been so anxiously looking forward to

had come at last. The past few weeks had seemed years to me. I said within myself,—“Ere the sun go down behind those trees, I shall, God willing, be face to face with poor Percy’s widow. I wonder how I shall be received? I, a dismal kind of messenger from a dying husband to a fond wife. Confound it,” I soliloquised, “if I could see any means of escape, I am not quite sure I should not avail myself of it, even at the eleventh hour, but I have a duty to perform, and I will buckle my armour on with good and honest resolutions.” I carefully reviewed the substance of the conversation which I had the day before with my father, and am utterly “at sea” as to his dismal reminiscences in connection with the Rodway family. To me it was certainly not the most refreshing theme to dwell upon. There are evidently some unpleasant surroundings of which I know nothing, and which are

rankling in the breast of my father. I used my best-directed endeavours, the previous night, to induce my mother, when we were having a confidential *tête-à-tête*, to impart to me what she knew, but all to no purpose. I intimated to her that, for the want of the knowledge she was possessed of, how very seriously I may compromise myself and mine, by remaining a guest at the Castle ; and how humiliating it would be to me to know hereafter that there had formerly existed in my family and the Rodway or Townsend people associations of an unpleasant character. But my mother was deaf to my entreaties. All she said was “Go, my dear boy, perform your duty like a man and good soldier, as you are, and leaven that duty, as far as you can, with pleasure. Make up your mind to thoroughly enjoy your visit, and dismiss from your thoughts anything and everything your father has so mysteri-

ously dropped into your sensitive ear, much against my wish."

Notwithstanding this wholesome advice, I had serious misgivings as to the future, which, for the life of me, I could not shake off.

Having carefully packed my portmanteau, and deposited Nora's likeness (the Shadow in the Gold) in a safe corner, together with the Bible and marker which I had to deliver to Percy's widow, I summoned Curtis, and directed him to have the drag at the door after a very early breakfast I had ordered, at which, by-the-bye, I was anything but flourishing. I worked myself up to such a pitch of excitement, consequent on the anticipation of the day that was mapped out before me, the ice I should have to break through, and probably tumble headlong into, and the dear girl—

'Bother!' I said, as I deposited the last

article (which was none other than a packet containing a few locks of Percy's hair) in my portmanteau, and called my valet to strap it up.

As the hour was much too early for my good mother to put in an appearance at the breakfast-table, I went to her boudoir, where I found her in her dressing-gown, throned in a comfortable easy-chair, anxiously expecting me.

"Softly, Oliver, dear," she said, "your father is soundly sleeping; I would not have him disturbed on any account; he has been most restless the whole night. To tell you the truth, my son, he does not half like your going to Carthewin Castle."

"But he never hinted at any objection," I replied, with some vehemence.

"I am perfectly aware of that," continued my mother, "as I was present during your colloquy, and greatly amused was I

to see your father in such high dudgeon in so trivial a matter; nevertheless, I know what is passing in his mind, and the smallest spark added to such material, would inevitably cause a great explosion."

"But you are both so confoundly reticent," I replied, "that I am utterly at a loss to know what to make of it; and, upon my soul, my dear mother, I have at this moment the greatest mind to wire to Mr Townsend, and say that 'Circumstances over which I have no control have transpired, which will prevent me from the pleasure I should have otherwise felt, in paying him the promised visit.'"

"Nothing of the sort," interrupted my mother. "Were you to act so, it would greatly vex me, and also your indulgent father. Oh, Oliver, you need thank God

that you have such a parent; he is kindness itself, and one of ten thousand."

"I would not vex 'Dear Sir,' as I call him, or you, love, for all creation; you know that, you darling old mother!" I said, tenderly kissing her. Alas! so cold, so thin, and white, that a shudder passed through my frame at the probability of not having her with us much longer, and her subsequent conversation seemed almost to point to such a presentiment within her breast.

"You have always been a good, dear son to me," she replied; "and in after years, when I have passed away from your midst, will it not be a comforting reflection in solitary moments to look back on an exemplary life, and one so much charged with filial duty as yours has been?"

"The best of all earthly comforts," I

responded, with a choking sensation. "I am not insensible, my good mother, of your devotion from my cradle to this very hour."

"Bless you, my own, my dear boy," she replied, in a tremulous voice, resting her thin white hand on my shoulder, and with a pathetic entreaty in her soft eyes, importuned me to be cautious in all my actions at Carthewin Castle, and to remember a true old proverb, that "Troubles not unfrequently come on horseback, and go away on foot."

At that moment I thought of the "Shadow in the Gold," the letter, the Bible, book-marker, and Constance Templar—they all passed in rapid succession in my mind. I was on the brink of making a clean "breast" of it, but a still, small voice arrested my intention, and, as it were, whispered, "*Gardez Oliver, gardez!*" and,

embracing my mother most affectionately, and taking a loving and parting look at "Dear Sir," who was peacefully sleeping in the adjoining room, I departed with a heart as heavy as lead.

CHAPTER XVI.

MY FIRST VISIT TO CARTHEWIN CASTLE.

AT four P.M., in a quaint little room, panelled with old oak, which, by-the-bye, went by the name of the "Ladies' Snuggery," sat Nora and her step-sister Gertrude, the former very busy restoring a defect in some Gobelin tapestry, the latter engaged in some plain sewing, which she was preparing for a "mothers' meeting," usually held monthly at the vicarage. Both ladies seemed much absorbed in their respective work.

All was silent within that little chamber except a monotonous stitch, stitch, stitch of the needles, and the regular tick, tick, tick of an antiquated brass clock on an elevated

mantelpiece, which, at intervals of fifteen minutes, chimed in deep-toned accents the quarters, as if protesting against the solemn silence that reigned supreme within that sanctum. No one was privileged to enter that room, under any pretence whatever, excepting the ladies of the household and domestics.

“Bother!” launched out Gertrude, throwing a very tiny, odd-looking garment (much like a spread eagle) on the table; “I can’t put in the gusset, I never could, and what is more, I won’t attempt to try again, without proper instruction. Mamma is going mad over these fiddle-de-dee things, and mothers’ meetings!”

“Patience is a virtue,” said Nora, pausing over her work, and looking at her step-sister with some astonishment.

“I have no patience, Sissy,” went on Gertrude,—“never had; you know it. My

governess said that it was a hopeless case with me, and that I never should acquire the virtue. You can do all these things like 'anything:' I vote you have a turn at this wretched little article!"

"If your governess said your case is hopeless, she has imparted to you (I am quite sure unintentionally) that which cannot be strictly true. Without patience, my dear Gerty, we can never hope to attain any stability in life; it is the key that unlocks the difficulties that surround our daily existence, and if we possess it, we surmount obstacles and survive trials which would otherwise block our pathway with an infinity of barriers."

"Ah me! how am I to acquire it?" said Gertrude, with a deep, weary sigh. "I have not the proper key, you know, so I suppose I must pick the lock."

"By perseverance," continued Nora, "and

a full determination not to be conquered."

"Will you help this poor little sinner over her difficulties?" asked Gertrude, looking up with a touchingly grateful expression.

"As far as in me lies," responded Nora, with an approving smile; "yes, that I will, heartily and cheerfully, my child."

"How shall I requite you for all your goodness, Sissy?"

"By becoming a persevering little pupil, and evermore ignoring the monosyllable 'can't,' and substituting in its place the word 'persist.'"

"That reminds me," replied Gertrude archly. "A gentleman once asked a lady to marry him,—in other words, 'popped' the question. She hesitated—he entreated, and asked if she could give him any hope. She smiled complacently, and requested him to transpose the word 'stripes,' and then see

her again. After fumbling for some time over the letters in solitude, he had the felicity of metamorphosing them into ‘persist.’ ”

“And what was the result, you funny child?” asked Nora, in an unconcerned tone.

“History does not say, but if there were any truth in it, ten to one if he did not go ‘ahead’ after that! Look here, Sissy, if Curly Cuth continue any of his usual spooneyism, bring the ‘stripes’ down upon him like ‘anything!’ ”

“Indeed I should do nothing of the kind, Gertrude; that would be an encouragement, and I have to request that you will not introduce his name in connection with me.”

“But he is awfully nice sometimes, isn’t he?”

“Men not unfrequently appear ‘nice,’ as

you call it, Gerty, when they are bent upon attaining some particular end of their own; and when that is accomplished, the true character, which it is impossible for them to conceal, rises like a cork to the surface."

"But really, Sissy, joking apart, he is splendid sometimes, is he not? — though there is nothing to shudder at."

"Did I shudder?"

"Didn't you, that's all! It positively gave me the shivers. But I won't tease you any more to-day, deary. Upon my word, were I but a few years older, I would 'set my cap' (as mamma calls it) at Cuth, if only to lure him from his prey! — ahem!"

"And what then, you silly child?" asked Nora, colouring deeply.

"Why, leave him where Judy Radcliff, left old Sir Thomas Simons,—in the lurch to be sure!"

At this moment the antiquated clock (on

which Nora had been casting anxious and repeated glances) chimed the four quarters, and then in deep tones struck six.

“Papa told me that Major Grey would arrive at about half-past six or seven,” remarked Gertrude, with an arch look.

“Did he?”

“Did he! Oh, that’s good! Why, you know he did, and you know that you have been counting the minutes on that dismal old dial for the last forty hours, more or less. I have been watching you, my lady; but don’t look cross, Sissy, because I can see through a hole in a ladder! I know your nerves are waltzing about like ‘anything.’”

“Don’t be silly, child,” interrupted Nora petulantly, at the same time inquiring what conveyance was sent to the railway station to meet the Major and Mr Rodway.

“I heard papa tell Harvey to have ‘George’ and ‘Dragon’ put into the mail-phæton.

Henry is going to take the cart for the luggage and the two valets. I suppose Major Grey will bring his man,—papa said something about it. How Leonard hates all these strange fellows in the servants' hall. He told me the other day he would just as soon be transported, for it takes half his time to keep them in order during meal times; and they show such airs."

"Poor Leonard is one of the old school, Gerty, and too much advanced in years to keep pace with the rising generation, consequently he does not make due allowance for youth and vigorous enthusiasm."

A long pause, and the needles are at work again.

"Where is mamma, Gerty?"

"In her bedroom, I think; she will be dressed like Queen Sheba by dinner time," said Gertrude. "I vote we do ditto, and tid-e-vate a bit before our grand swell

cousin and this awfully grand grenadier, or whatever they call him, make their appearance. I do so long to see the Major and what he is like. Who knows, perhaps he has feet large enough for other people to walk upon. How I hate big feet—don't you? Perhaps he has a slight cast in one eye, or a voice a kind of 'down amongst the dead men,' or in the upper C sharp. Don't you dislike men who squeak out their words like a tin whistle?"

Nora placed her work aside, and intently fixed her eyes on the triangular pattern in the carpet. In other words, she was lost in thought; then suddenly recovering herself, as if half ashamed of giving way, she walked to the heavy mullioned window, and looked out on the vast park, stretching far away in the distance to indistinctness. It was the bright and sunny time of the year, the harvest was quickly ripening, some

falling under the sickle of the reaper. The sun had gone down over the Belvidere in great splendour, tipping the hills with gold, as he dipped lower and lower. The firmament, with a mixture of ultramarine and other resplendent colours, formed one grand transformation scene.

The winds were at rest, some birds were in song, and the water in the silvery lake flowed gently and silently on; here and there a squirrel presented himself, in search of his evening meal; the beautiful white owl, rich in plumage, noiselessly and gracefully swept past the castle to the granary at the home farm, where, in a dilapidated tower, the owls and owlets have, for many generations, ensconced themselves unmolested.

The dew was falling heavily, kissing with its evening breath the sweetbriar and double white stocks, filling the air with delicious odours.

Nora had a soul that loved nature's loveliness, an incomparable tenderness of heart, and the utmost consideration for those dependent upon her. Eliminating the sorrow consequent on the loss of her husband, all was morning within her happy nature, which was like a bubbling spring of joy.

Our heroine stood at the window absorbed in deep thought, with her eyes fixed on the entrance-gate at the east lodge, distant about three-quarters of a mile from the Castle. The author must leave it to the imagination of the reader as to what was passing in her mind, and the probable struggle that awaited her: the rosy hue that suffused her chiselled face was an index of an internal disturbance. At this point, a pair of thoroughbred, high-stepping horses came dashing through the entrance gates and up the centre drive, at the rate of twelve miles an hour, the white foam

and mud that bespattered their faultless shapes showed the pace they had been travelling from the railway station.

Immediately the carriage entered the park, a salute from three large guns that were mounted on a promontory facing the Castle, spoke of the honour accorded to one of the Crimean heroes, and the grand old bells of Carthewin Church rang out merry peals of hearty welcome to Major Oliver Grey, one of the survivors of "Slaughter Hill!"

Godfrey Townsend arranged all this ovation unknowingly to his wife or Nora. As the cannon roared and the bells struck out, our heroine turned deadly pale, staggered to the sofa, and gradually sinking on the velvet cushions, resolutely struggled (with womanly pride) to overcome the indescribable depression that steals away the senses, and leaves its victim powerless, cold, and deathlike.

With a supreme effort, however, Nora sprang from the couch, and rapidly pacing the room, rallied herself sufficiently to ring the bell for her maid, in whose care we will for the present leave her.

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As the well-appointed horses rattled up to the courtyard of the Castle, and were pulled together with great abruptness at the main entrance, Leonard (the butler) and two footmen appeared.

“Well, Leonard,” said Mr Rodway, throwing the reins across the loins of “George” and “Dragon,” at whose heads stood the keenest-looking and smartest of coachmen, “here I am again, alive and ‘kicking’!”

“Needn’t ask you how you are, Mr Cuthbert; you look as fit as fit can be,—more so than master’s pet horses, sir.”

“Ah, yes, exactly,” replied Mr Rodway. “I have been ‘tooling’ these animals over

a stiffish bit of country, with the very worst roads—nearly all collar, don't you know?—up to twelve miles an hour. Hang it all, I like to 'toddle' when I have hold of the ribbons; but, my conscience, Leonard, how they do go! bang up to the knocker, and no error!"

The groom (with matchless hat and boots) closed one eye and looked significantly at the butler, who perfectly comprehended its meaning, as the former led the horses away to the stabling, streaming with perspiration.

"Walk in, Major Grey," said Cuthbert, with a jaunty air. "By George! this seems to be a kind of gala day, Leonard. When those corpulent guns spoke out, I'm blest if I thought I should ever hold that 'Dragon;' he pulled like distraction; it occurred to me at one time he had the bit between his teeth and was about to bolt."

"Really, sir!" said Leonard, who was eyeing

the stalwart proportions of your humble servant with much curiosity.

I may be mistaken, but if I saw one servant in the hall, the corridor, and landing-places, I must have seen twenty, all on tip-toe to have a peep at this deponent, or as much as was left of me—which, by-the-bye, is something considerably over six feet.

“Well, Leonard, how are uncle and aunt?” continued Cuthbert, depositing his Bowler on the nearest peg, then passing four long fingers through his hair, and admiring himself in the glass.

“Very well, thank you, Mr Cuthbert. Master is in the magistrates’ room with a couple of policemen—poaching affair, or something going on; he told me to tell you he would be out in a few minutes.”

“Blest if I wouldn’t hang all the poachers straight away, if I had my will,” responded Cuthbert. “Here, Leonard, help the Major

off with his coat. Egad, my man, if you are not tall enough, get the steps."

Leonard frowned a trifle—he was a domestic who always prided himself on his own proportions—but those dimensions in front of him beat (in his estimation) all creation; and leading the way to the double drawing-room, I was ushered in by the footman, who, in a loud and audible voice, called out,—

"Major Grey and Mr Rodway."

Mrs Townsend and her daughter Gertrude, attired in their faultless evening dress, were lounging on the sofa. For the moment I thought the latter must be Nora, and I was quite alive to the fact that I flamed crimson, then subsided into a "milky whey."

"Well, aunt dear, however are you?" said Cuthbert Rodway, going up with much rapidity and kissing that lady on both cheeks, and after accommodating Gertrude with a

similar salute, turned towards me and said,—
“I have the pleasure and privilege of being the first to introduce to you a very short acquaintance of mine, Major Oliver Grey, an officer whose reputation is well known to all England.”

“And I have the unspeakable pleasure of making the acquaintance of Major Grey, and offering him a hearty welcome within our midst,” said Mrs Townsend, squeezing my hand with much enthusiasm. “Gertrude dear, let me introduce Major Grey to you—my daughter, Major Grey.”

“It is very kind of you, my dear madam,” I stammered, at the same time making a profound bow. “I know of few pleasures so refreshing to a weary traveller as a hearty welcome; and that pleasure is all the more enhanced when it emanates from, comparatively speaking (if I may be allowed the term), a stranger.”

“Pray do not put it in that light, Major Grey; we are old friends don’t you know—very old friends, I may say. Your name and deeds, in common with many other brave men, are household words. You have been rendering us all good service, and the mothers and daughters of dear old England are proud to own you as a friend, and doubly proud to have an opportunity of offering you the hospitality of our homes. Say, then, if we are not very old friends!”

I felt at the moment that Mrs Townsend had no tricks of starchiness or affected ease in her composition, and that I had landed in the house of lovable people. I was not so sure, though, that I had not tumbled this time up against a “blue stocking,” and that if I didn’t “watch it,” I should be quietly paddled clean out of my depth into mid stream. It would have been a relief to me at this juncture if someone had come

to my rescue, as I very respectfully bowed in acknowledgment, saying,—

“Thanks, very much, dear madam, for the graceful allusion you have been pleased to make on behalf of myself and comrades in arms. I trust for the future, as in the past, we shall be so fortunate as to earn for ourselves the good opinion you have formed of us.”

“I am sure, Major Grey, you will do that,” replied Mrs Townsend, with one of her best expressions.

How unemotional Mrs Townsend looked this evening, dressed with the most consummate taste—the very pink of perfection. Her demeanour was a trifle dignified, but exceedingly graceful; and her superb head and neck, on the grandest of shoulders, would have done justice to the Louvre Venus.

“Really, Major Grey,” continued Mrs Townsend, “it is positively cruel of us to be

holding a prolonged *tête-à-tête* without consideration for your wants. I will, if you will allow me, ring for Leonard, who will conduct you to your bachelor's quarters in the east wing, where I trust you will find all that you require."

"I have already found, my dear madam, that which I mostly value—a hearty welcome."

"I am glad you feel at home, Major Grey. It affords me additional pleasure," responded Mrs Townsend.

"I could not feel otherwise," I replied.

"It is kind of you to say so," continued my hostess, with much *empressement* the diamond cross that was pillowed on her ample bust flashing like a cascade of lights. "I have to apologise, Major Grey, for the absence of Mr Townsend, who will be with us, no doubt, by the time you are dressed for dinner. A little magisterial duty has

occupied him for the last half-hour : it was so unfortunate."

"I shall be delighted to make Mr Townsend's acquaintance," I responded.

"I can answer for it, Major Grey, the feeling will be reciprocal. Mr Townsend has been looking forward with infinite pleasure to your visit here."

"I quite omitted, dear madam, to ask after the health of Mrs Snowdon," I ventured apologetically, and with something like a jerk.

"Thank you, Major Grey. She is, I am sorry to say, but so so. The last hour or two she has been a little excited : one really cannot wonder at it. It is manifestly the outcome of anxiety, dear child, consequent on the prospect of seeing you. After all, it is but natural. Happily my nephew here, who is always brimful of spirits, has come amongst us for a while,

and I have no doubt he will add his quota to the general fund of amusement."

Mr Rodway made a profound bow, saying,—

"My dear aunt, you have, with your usual power of discrimination, anticipated my most earnest desire; and if I don't, by hook or by crook, as the saying is, get Nora out of all dismals, it will not be my fault."

Mrs Townsend gave her nephew an approving smile. I may be mistaken, but I thought there was an expression of sadness portrayed in the countenance of Gertrude, as she resolutely fixed her large violet eyes on her mother.

"And to make the matter worse," continued Mrs Townsend, elevating that wonderfully powerful head, "my husband ordered those horrible guns to be fired. No doubt it had the effect of upsetting dear Nora, at a time she most needed support; but her

father, I am quite sure, never anticipated the consequences."

"I greatly fear, dear madam, from your manner, that they are serious. I am much concerned to think that I am the cause of—"

"Not much has happened, Major Grey," interrupted Mrs Townsend. "I have no doubt you will see Nora at dinner;" and she continued, "Leonard, conduct Major Grey to his room, and be sure you see that all his requirements are observed."

"If you please, ma'm," said that functionary, pulling down with a jerk the corners of his black cloth waistcoat, as he led the way.

"Well, I never! Did you ever?—No, I never!" exclaimed Gertrude, lifting up her hands in amazement as the door closed.

"I say, aunt, giants don't abound in this part of the county. I'm blest if your young friend don't make me look and feel uncommonly small."

"He is tall, is he not?" responded Mrs Townsend thoughtfully, seizing her white poodle by the neck and caressing him.

"Tall is not the word. Prodigious or colossal, is more like it," said Cuthbert.

"He is exceedingly handsome, mamma," ventured Gertrude, at the same time adjusting a small bunch of violets a few inches below a gold locket that reposed on her spotless neck.

"Well—yes—somewhat."

"Awfully brown," remarked Cuthbert.

"You would have been done brown," said Gertrude, "if you had passed through the fire that he has, Mr Cuthbert—as brown as any cooked goose could be."

"Fie! Gerty, fie!" said Mrs Townsend, turning aside to suppress a laugh.

"You highly-bred young blushing beauty, you are always trying to be down upon me; but there is one thing to be said,

we understand each other; and if I give you a ‘Rowland for an Oliver’ don’t wince, mind,” said Cuthbert, slightly colouring.

“It strikes me,” replied Gertrude, with a little vicious look, “if I had the chance, I should not care to part with an ‘Oliver’ for your ‘Rowland,’ as you call it.”

“Mamma, dear,” she continued, as if anxious to change the subject, “how very quiet and retiring Major Grey is.”

“Very.”

“No one would ever think to look at him that he is the hero we have read so much about.”

“Well — yes, I should,” replied Mrs Townsend, examining, in a preoccupied manner, the back of her nails. “I am rarely, if ever, deceived in my judgment of character.”

“Walker !” said Mr Rodway, within himself.

And Julia Townsend thought, — “Yes, this is a powerful man, physically and mentally. There is a tenderness and mystery unfathomable about him, which I cannot decipher, and there are unaccountable elements in his nature, which will come to the surface in due time. I will ‘canter’ him out in proper season, and I flatter myself that Julia Townsend has a very clear perception of sifting the weeds from the cultivated flowers. I love Constance Templar, and will study Major Grey’s character, disposition, and antecedents to the very core, if only for her dear sake.”

“I say, aunt, don’t you think it was a lot of nonsense for uncle to make such a display with those three guns, Og, Gog, and Magog. One would have thought it was his own son and heir who had arrived.”

“Utterly absurd, Cuthbert!” said Mrs Townsend, with a touch of reproachfulness,

“but, for Heaven’s sake, don’t you refer to it in your uncle’s presence.”

“Egad! not I; but why did you allow it, aunt?”

“Why did I allow it? I knew nothing about the arrangement, until I was nearly thrown off the music-stool by the concussion; and Nora’s maid told me that Mrs Snowdon absolutely fainted away.”

“You don’t speak it, aunt?”

“It is positively true.”

“I am uncommonly sorry to hear it; I should like to run up and cheer her a bit, aunt, if she is anywhere come-at-able.”

“Then you just won’t do anything of the kind, Mr Cuth,” said Gertrude, pursing up her pretty little mouth very considerably. “I have just left her, and she wants to be quiet; so the best thing you can do, if you wish to kill time, is to see how present-able you can make yourself to take me

down to dinner, an accomplishment you are thoroughly up in. By-the-bye, how do you like the Major, Cuth?"

"Well, upon my soul, Gerty, I haven't cast him up yet, as the saying is; when I do, I will tell you what it comes to. But he is a fellow one cannot very easily sumtotalise. There is a goodish bit of him to view, though, isn't there? Good lord! you should have seen Leonard when the Major came into the hall. The old man wanted a pair of steps to help him off with his coat. By-the-bye, the governor hasn't seen him yet, has he?"

"Papa won't find much difficulty, for he will soon have ocular demonstration," replied Gertrude. "I fancy I shall like Major Grey, Cuth, he has such a subdued air about him,—a sort of thing I like in a man, that is, when it is natural; but in some men it appears all forced, don't you know,—facial,

or something of that kind, which I am not quite clever enough to explain."

"One into me, for a hundred," said Cuthbert.

"You! why, dear cousin, you are the most natural man to be found on this insignificant planet of ours," answered Gertrude, with a little toss of her head, which, to a keen observer, was suggestive.

"Ah,—exactly,—I see. It strikes me very forcibly, Gerty, that your governess has been teaching you a thing or two lately. You are well up in the stirrups, little lady; take care, though, my charming tea, toast, and butter, that your animal don't run away with you, and land you on the wrong side of a big fence."

"If he were to," responded Gertrude, "no one so capable of coming to my rescue as Cuthbert Rodway, Esquire, justice of the peace, and would-be sheriff of the

county, and member of parliament. Now, having exhausted my vocabulary of words, do you go and tid-e-vate, whilst I will seek Nora and tell her all about it."

"All about what?" asked Cuthbert, twisting his moustache to an extreme point.

"Oh, the new comer, and—and—you, of course;—nothing like you—you are a host in yourself;" and away the little light-hearted oddity frisked, humming,—

"Good-bye, sweetheart, good-bye."

Gertrude found her step-sister in her boudoir with her maid, looking much brighter and more cheerful.

"Thank you, Fergus, you can now leave me," said Nora to her maid.

"You will promise, my dear young lady, not to give way again, won't you? I know you can't help it, but it makes you so ill, and so puffed under your eyes, that you

are not fit to be seen, and so unlike my lady. If you are not well enough, ma'm, don't you go down to dinner ; pray don't.

“We shall see, Fargus.”

“I don't know, Gerty, what I should do without that good girl. Now tell me how have you got on downstairs? Those horrible guns and the bells did for me entirely ; but I am getting all right again.”

“Have you caught sight of the Major?” asked Gertrude.

“No, Gerty, I have not had the heart to move.”

“Then when you do catch sight of his lordship, you will never, never forget it!”

“Why,—so tall?”

“A regular giant!”

“Is he nice?”

“Nice!—yes, nicer than anything I have come across for many a long day : you are at home with him in a moment. I sup-

pose he took me to be wonderfully juvenile, for, whilst talking to me on one occasion, he put his hand upon my shoulder—my conscience, such a hand!”

“How did mamma receive him?” asked Nora, at the same time freely manipulating the smelling-salts.

“She took to him wonderfully: they chatted away ‘no end.’ I know mater thinks him awfully clever.”

“Did he—” a long pause.

“Did he what, Sissy?”

“Oh, nothing,” said Nora, with a weary sigh.

“Did he ask after you, were you going to say?” continued Gertrude.

“Yes,” murmured Nora, again consulting the smelling-salts.

“Not for some time, but whenever the door opened, I thought he anxiously looked towards it, expecting to see you enter. I

am sure he was uneasy, for I kept my eye on him, in a quiet kind of way, the whole time. Suddenly he coloured to his eyes, and said,—‘I quite omitted, Mrs Townsend, to ask after the health of Mrs Snowdon.’”

“And what did mamma say?” asked Nora, smiling benignly.

“A lot of fine things;—that you were fairly well, though naturally excited at the thought of seeing him, and—”

“What nonsense!” exclaimed Nora.

“And,” went on Gertrude, “that you may appear at dinner to-day, and you may not, and so on, and so forth. I can’t quite recollect. But brush up, Sissy, brush up; you look so nice this evening,—quite captivating! Do come down to dinner. You won’t be shot dead by a glance of his eyes, neither will he bore you with his tongue. Somehow, he appears different to all other men I have ever

met ;—though so prodigiously gigantic, he is very gentle. I tell you, mamma is struck up in a heap, so to speak, with him ; I know she is, by her manner. Do come down ; you will, won't you, deary ? Papa will take charge of you ; I can ' nail ' Curly Cuth—I prepared him for it just now ; and, of course, the grenadier will take mamma."

"Has papa seen the Major yet ?" asked Nora : "you don't speak of him."

"No ; father has been awfully bothered with two policemen and those poachers, in the magistrates' room ; they unfortunately turned in just before Cuth drove up to the door. Only fancy papa having the guns fired !"

"Dear father !" sighed Nora, "he had some meaning in it."

"Mamma was in high dudgeon about it, I can assure you," said Gertrude.

A knock at the door.

"Come in."

"Well, Fargus?" said Nora, to her maid.

"If you please, ma'm, your father wishes to see you in the library at once."

"Is he alone, Fargus?"

"Yes, ma'm."

"Please say I will be with him in a few minutes."

Exit Fargus.

"Hurrah, Sissy!" screamed Gertrude.

"I am so glad! Never say die, child alive, something is up for certain! Joy cometh, you know, in the morning!"

"I will screw my courage to the sticking point, my light-hearted girl, if only for your sake and my father's; but I must away, for papa is waiting for me in the library."

"And Curly Cuth, no doubt, is looking for poor little me in the hall—bother!" said Gertrude, frisking out of the room.

CHAPTER XVII.

WE MET.

I NEVER was finiken over my toilet, albeit, after Leonard deposited me in my quarters to dress for dinner, I felt that the time had arrived when I should make myself as presentable as the resources of my portmanteau would admit. Accordingly I brushed up to the best advantage. Thackeray says :—
“The world is a looking-glass, and gives back to every man the reflection of his own face ; frown at it, and it will in return look sourly upon you ; laugh at it and with it, and it is a jolly good companion.” I felt at the moment the truth of this, as I made my way, with feelings

akin to nervousness, to the drawing-room, where I found all the members of the Townsend family. Words of mine cannot give force to describe what I felt when I entered that apartment, ablaze with dazzling lights, throwing their brilliant rays on all around. I knew she was there — yes, the ideal woman whose image I had treasured up for the last fifteen months next my heart ; she who had occupied more of my thoughts than I should care at this juncture to disclose ; she who had been, as it were, my companion through the long, still, dreary nights I experienced in that wretched Russian homestead, wounded and fever-stricken ; she for whom I had fervently prayed that kind Providence would permit me to look upon. I felt at the moment a reed, and that others in that room were rocks, on which I may, sooner or later, founder. I felt this hour, nay this moment, was the

one great *coup* of my career, as the bulky form of Godfrey Townsend advanced towards me, and, with a hearty squeeze of both my hands, said,—

“Major Grey, this is a day I have been looking forward to with much delight,—its advent is especially pleasing and gratifying to me; I say with all my heart, welcome, welcome to our home.”

“I need no words, Mr Townsend, to be convinced of the hearty welcome you have accorded me. I trust my prospective actions, sir, will earn for me your esteem.”

I saw a fan or two being manipulated freely on the sofa; I said within myself,—“Good Lord! have I made a ‘hash’ of it!”

“You have earned that already,” responded Mr Townsend complacently; “but come, my young friend, let me introduce you to my daughter Nora,” who at that moment was

staring into vacancy. At the sound of her name she immediately rose from the couch, and, with cheeks mantled with youthful blushes, shook my hand warmly, tremblingly, saying,—

“How good of you to come and see us;” and down went the long eyelashes, fringed on her cheek.

At a glance, I perceived that she was quivering under the rod of affliction, as I stammered out,—

“It was good and kind of your father to send me an invitation, Mrs Snowdon;” and in order to branch off by the nearest cut, from the confounded conventionalties that were assuming such proportions, I began in a promiscuous way to dilate on the magnificent drive I had experienced from the railway station.

“Ah, by - the - bye,” said Mr Townsend good-temperedly, “if ‘George’ and ‘Dragon’

could only speak, they would give a pretty accurate description of that memorable drive, Mr Cuthbert; I went into their loose boxes just now, and could not help asking Harvey if he had been giving the animals a Turkish bath, they were in such a state."

Cuthbert looked "daggers" at Leonard, who happened just then to be in the room; he evidently had a shrewd suspicion that that functionary had been telling tales.

"The fact is, uncle," said Cuthbert, "the beggars pulled so, and fretted themselves like mad over those killing hills, that I don't wonder at 'dissolving views.' I know they took it out of my wrists, and no error." Then Mr Rodway advanced to the couch, and, addressing our heroine in silken tones, said,—

"And now, ma belle cousine, tell me all about it,—first, how ever are you?—secondly, what have you been doing with your pretty

little self lately?—thirdly, what is the programme for the coming week, in which I am naturally interested, don't you know?"

Nora coloured slightly at the conclusion of her cousin's remarks. She was quite alive to the fact that Mrs Townsend's eyes were riveted upon her; and although the latter was having a *tête-à-tête* with me, she was nevertheless taking "in," with keen perception, all that was going on in the room.

"To tell you the truth, Cuthbert," said Nora, making room for her cousin on the couch, "I have not been well lately."

"Ah—no appetite perhaps," said Cuthbert.

"No, not exactly that," replied Nora.

"Nervous, perhaps," ventured Cuthbert.

"Not exactly nervous either."

"A good deal of bother lately, eh?"

"Bother you, Cuth," said Gertrude; and adding, very *sotto voce*, "you horror!"

"Well, ye — ye — yes," said Nora. "I

have had some, yes—much trouble,” and down went the lashes again.

“Poor little creature,” added Cuthbert. “Lonely. By Jove! I have hit the mark this time, and no error. I’ll wake you up, ha! ha! ha!”

“No, Cuthbert, I am never lonely when I have Gerty with me, and the run of our library,” responded Nora, screening her face with her swansdown fan, behind which she was looking askance at her step-sister. “Having now disposed of one of your very methodical questions,” went on Nora, “I will enlighten you as to number two. I have been quite a recluse for some time, except occasionally having a gallop over the downs and a ramble in my old favourite retreat amongst the ruins of the abbey, and—”

“Why, my dear cousin,” interrupted Mr Rodway, “this kind of life is enough to

give you the ‘blues,’ and reduce you to something like fiddle-strings. By Jove! it would give me the blue d—; well, no matter what.”

“Fie! Cuthbert, fie!” cut in Mrs Townsend; “I am listening to you.”

Cuthbert drew a long face, pursed up his mouth to a decided “Oh,” adjusted his eye-glass, and said to Nora, *sotto voce*,—

“The dowager has marvellous ears and microscopic eyes. By George! we must mind our p’s and q’s!”

Nora thought of those letters of warning her father had previously given her, so she shrugged her shoulders, but made no reply.

“You have not answered my third question, Nora, respecting your programme for the coming week,” said Cuthbert. “I am here, don’t you know, for a round of pleasure, and have made up my mind to go ‘in’ for it this time, and no error, provided

that you, and my other amiable cousin here, will pull an oar with me."

"I don't quite know, Cuthbert, in what manner I can add to the general fund of your amusement, except it be the ordinary and very common-place routine you usually find here," replied Nora, with a deep sigh.

"The fact is," said Gertrude, who for some time had evidently been a good listener, "Nora is not quite up to the mark yet. But I am 'all there,' don't you know; and to-morrow morning, after we have disposed of our coffee and anchovy toast, I will dish you up as savoury a little programme for the day as your restless body may desire—ahem!"

"Upon my conscience, Gerty," responded Cuthbert, pulling out and curling with his first finger and thumb an elongated moustache, "you are an invigorating little bud of humanity,—a delectable 'pick-me-up.' Your gover-

ness has manifestly been refreshing your fertile brain within the last year or two to such an extent that I am sometimes doubtful whether an overdose of erudition may not prematurely deprive your parents of a most prominent member of the family ; but no offence ; you know, Gerty, I am only anxious, and positively alarmed, about your physical condition,—ha ! ha ! ha ! ”

“ About my what ? ” said Gertrude, knitting her brows a little, but who didn’t mind one bit what her cousin said to her, neither was she scrupulous as to the many “ home thrusts ” she made at him ; for these twain were invariably chaffing each other,—so much so, that a superficial observer would arrive at the conclusion that “ daggers ” were drawn. Not so, however. Cuthbert was fond of his cousin, and he delighted in airing his puns and nonsensical dialogue whenever a favourable opportunity presented

itself. Gertrude, in like manner, when she saw an opening, put in her foil with marvellous dexterity, sometimes making him wince.

The second gong announced that dinner was ready.

I had been having a lively conversation on general topics with Mr and Mrs Townsend, and was greatly struck with the latter's vast extent of knowledge with respect to Government matters, political economy, and affairs of the State generally. She was thoroughly "well up" in diplomacy, and her personal friends (to whom she frequently referred), who ranked high at headquarters, were legion! Happily, I was a good listener, and never once ventured on ground that wouldn't bear me; for had I, she, of all other women, would have gloried in seeing me go to grief. Never in the whole course of my life did

I feel greater relief than when Mr Townsend asked me to take his consort down to dinner, and thus disturbed a dialogue which I was getting the worst of.

Cuthbert was on the point of offering his arm to Nora, when that sly puss Gertrude frisked up (true to her promise) and said, with an arch smile,—

“Now, don’t be shabby, Cousin Cuth, and neglect poor me at the eleventh hour. See, I am all smiles and tears! Dad will take down Nora.”

And before Mr Rodway had time to make a reply and enter his protest, that little tease seized his arm, and they were *en route via* the grand staircase to the dining-room.

Mr Townsend escorted his eldest daughter, and, affectionately squeezing her hand as it rested on his arm, said,—

“You are looking more like your own dear

self to-night, my child: it reminds me of old times."

"How good of you to think so, father," responded Nora, reciprocating the gentle squeeze of the arm. "I am always like myself, dear, when you are with me, am I not?"

Having reached the dining-room, it put a stop to further conversation; but Nora's demeanour with her father belied her assumed gaiety: she was undergoing a severe mental struggle. Her father knew too well his daughter's temperament: he had made it his study, and watched her from early childhood, penetrating with paternal devotion into the inmost recesses of her heart; granting her every reasonable wish, and rejecting, with firmness, every inconsistency. The memorable injunction given by the late Mrs Townsend on her deathbed, respecting the

future of her infant child, was always uppermost in Godfrey Townsend's mind,—this night particularly so. Curiously enough, it was the eve of the anniversary of her death; but no allusion was *ever* made to it, albeit Nora annually spent a short time in the chancel of Carthewin Church, decorating with wreaths of the whitest and choicest of flowers, her mother's marble tomb.

The ladies assembled with a soft rustle of trailing draperies; the sweet odour from laced handkerchiefs, the fragrance from pines and melons on the table, and the aroma of some old brown East India sherry on the sideboard, perfumed the air with delicious scents.

Mr Townsend, with Nora on his right at the bottom of the table, looked eminently handsome, and when grace was being said, I had, for the first time, a steady look at

poor Percy's "Virgin Widow";—yes, the "Shadow in the Gold," "My Nora," as he called her; and his own dying words came back to me, "If ever, Oliver, you come face to face with the original, think of me." God knows I did think of him, and said within myself,—"Where is there a man to be found who could not adore that brilliant beauty?"

Mr Townsend, at the dinner-table, was one of the wittiest and cheeriest of men; his daughter was graceful, retiring, modest, and (be it said in her favour), a good listener. The lady on my left, with ample bust, and marabout feather head-dress, was brimful of vivacity, and made some brilliant remarks with wonderful force, scintillating with great effect and rapidity; her sparkling wit was like the Hidesek's dry Monopole that was playing a mimic fountain in my glass. I thought Mr Rodway

looked a little *blasè* under the resplendent chandelier,—his incessant tongue, and the audible ha, ha, ha's, became very monotonous in course of time. I must say that gentleman's evanescent enthusiasm did not prepossess me; but the musical rapture of Gertrude made up for all deficiencies. I certainly looked upon her as one of the most incomparable girls I had ever met, there was such a happy natural ring in her voice, like a bubbling overflow from the spring of joy. Her type of glowing health, her laughing mouth, her speaking violet eyes; add to these her lithe and rounded form, and you have portrayed the reflex of Gertrude Townsend. But her step-sister Nora, that cherub of the spring! so subdued in manner, so retiring, so graceful, so refined—

Gentle, timid as a dove;

A girl that one could always love.

“Yes, Gertrude all life! Nora all soul! Give me the latter,” I soliloquised.

“By-the-bye, Major Grey,” said Mrs Townsend, who was peeling a peach that was impaled on her dessert fork, “you are intimately acquainted, I think, with a daughter of a very old and valued friend of mine.”

“I am glad to have that pleasure, and equally glad to have the privilege of knowing her friend in you,” I responded, with much *empressement*.

Mrs Townsend bent her head approvingly, a mouthful of peach preventing her from replying. Presently she went on,—

“Yes, the lady in question is a very great friend of mine; she is most highly esteemed by everyone, ‘strictly county,’ and a person of exceptional refinement and moral excellence.”

I looked across the room at Nora, and

from Nora to Gertrude. The former had buried half of her pretty face in a tumbler, evidently to conceal an expressive countenance. I had a shrewd suspicion, too, that Gertrude gave her cousin Cuthbert a kick under the table. It was suggestive, as much as to say,—“Look out! Mamma has her finger in some pie, results will presently follow.”

“Can’t you guess, Major Grey, to whom I refer?” ventured Mrs Townsend, again taking another mouthful of peach.

Leonard, the butler, smiled knowingly. Yes, he knew all about it,—he was “all there,” in the twinkling of an eye. Egad! the fellow knew everything, and everyone’s business, even to how many *bona fide* teeth his master and mistress had, and how many—well, no matter what, suffice it to say, that nothing escaped him.

“On my word, Mrs Townsend,” I replied apologetically, at the same time taking a promiscuous sip of port, “I haven’t the remotest idea to whom you refer.”

“Really?”

“I have not, on my word.”

“Think again,” sceptically.

“Is she tall or short?” I ventured.

“Well—medium.”

“Is she a blonde or brunette?”

“Mamma, dear,” said Nora entreatingly, “do put Major Grey out of his misery, and tell him at once it is Constance Templar.”

Like a shock from a powerful galvanic battery did the sound of that name go through the ventricle of my brain, and I know that I flamed crimson;—all eyes in the room apparently glared upon me in anxious expectation of a reply, which would naturally lead up to Miss Templar’s antecedents in connection with myself; but I

was equal to the occasion, and replied with great *sang froid* :—

“ I am rejoiced, dear madam, to learn that a lady to whom I am so much indebted for endless acts of kindness, is a personal friend of yours ; were I to live to be as full of years as Methuselah, I certainly could never sufficiently repay the debt I owe Miss Templar.”

Mrs Townsend looked me full in the face inquiringly ; then, musing awhile, she went on,—

“ Ah me ! soothing attentions, when rocked in the cradle of sickness, have a powerful effect on mankind ; but such debts of gratitude to which you refer, Major Grey, under certain conditions, can be discharged, don’t you know.”

(There was a little cough at the bottom of the room, and ahem !)

Mrs Townsend said this in measured accents, and in the most unemotional man-

ner; nevertheless, to me, it was very suggestive! Nora and Gertrude were both cracking filbert-nuts like distraction. Happily at that moment Cuthbert took the keen edge off my embarrassment, by saying,—

“I can tell you something, if you don't know it already, Major Grey, and that is, little Constance Templar has matchless staying powers in the ballroom. I have tripped the light fantastic with her on several occasions, and she invariably took the wind, so to speak, out of my sails, and danced everyone else clean out of sight. I don't know whether she has given that sort of thing up since she went in for the ‘Red Cross’ work.”

“Or for ‘fresher fields and pastures new,’” added Mrs Townsend; “anyhow, a better woman never drew the breath of life.”

“I think, madam, I am in a position to endorse every word you say,” I at last ventured.

“Do you remember, Julia,” cut in Mr Townsend, “what a fuss poor Sir John Steadfast made when Miss Templar politely thanked the baronet for the honour he had done her, and respectfully declined his proffered hand and attractive fortune. Egad! the people said his hair (like the prisoner of Chillon’s) grew white in a single night.”

“I remember all about it, Godfrey,” replied Mrs Townsend; “and, at the time, I considered that she acted in strict conformity with her own personal feelings and sound judgment; and I think a woman is to be highly commended for not precipitating an alliance, when there is a semblance of uncertainty as to their future happiness.”

Beastly bad taste, I thought, to open up such a subject at this juncture. How I pitied that sad white face at the bottom of the room!

“Bravo!” said Cuthbert; “why, my dear

aunt, you are warming to your work, and no error; don't you know that matters of that kind are wafted by all the winds of scandal?"

"I can tell you this, Cuthbert, that the good things people say of one's neighbours don't always fructify," said Mrs Townsend impressively.

"Ahem!" responded Cuthbert, "that accounts, I suppose, for my not rising in the scale of social excellence, ha! ha! ha!"

Everyone laughed except Nora, who was evidently fidgetting to catch her step-mother's eye, for a move to the drawing-room; a feat which she ultimately accomplished, and the *frou-frou* of the ladies' dresses as they glided out of the room was, I am sorry to admit, a very agreeable sound to me on that memorable night.

As the door closed, I felt a wonderful relief, and said within myself,—“Yes, surely,

it is women who sustain women, or condemn them."

"Draw up, Major Grey," said Mr Townsend, pointing to an empty chair by his side; "let us pledge your health in a bumper. Push the bottle, Cuthbert; hang it! man, fill your glass full, full to the brim. Major Grey, your good health, sir; I am uncommonly glad to have made your acquaintance, and proud to have in my house a soldier who has so distinguished himself. Cuthbert, my boy, your good health too; you know that you are always welcome here, so long as you don't kill my horses, or shoot my favourite spaniel in the covers instead of a hare, a feat which you very nearly accomplished the other day, I am sorry to say."

"Thank you, Mr Townsend, for pledging my health with such sincerity," I replied; "it is I who have reason to be proud of the honour you and your good wife have

conferred upon me, in receiving me into your midst as you would a personal friend of long standing."

"Not at all, not at all,—delighted!" replied my host. "Cuthbert, help yourself, and push the bottle."

Cuthbert did help himself, and with a hand which struck me as not the most steady, as he held up the glass, and, with one eye closed, viewed the ruby brightness of the liquor with complacency, saying,—

"Your—your good health, Major; may you live long, sir, and may you die happy, sir; those are my sentiments,—ha! ha! ha!"

"Hang it all, don't talk about dying, Cuthbert; don't you know the axiom, *Tempus rerum imperator!*" said Mr Townsend.

"*Qui dedit hoc hodie, cras si volet, auferet!* you will say amen to that, I know, uncle," said Cuthbert, drawing a long face.

Mr Townsend did not make any reply. I discovered that he was a man of quick discernment, and never made light of serious subjects.

“Genteel in personage,
Conduct, and equipage,
Noble by heritage,
Generous and free.”

“Cuthbert, pass the bottle. Before you young gentlemen adjourn to the drawing-room, where I always like to see my guests assemble in reasonable and seasonable time, we must drink to the ladies,” and, elevating his glass, continued,—“The ladies, God bless them!” in which I joined most fervently.

“Just one more toast, if I may be permitted, uncle,” said Mr Rodway, casting a suggestive look at me.

“Fire away, then, but be quick about it.”

“Here is long life and a happy one to our much esteemed little friend Constance

Templar, and the man who is lucky enough to secure her for a wife—ha ! ha ! ha !” and he glared at me.

I thought the remarks made by Mr Rodway with such familiarity, so uncalled for, that I scarcely responded, other than lifting the glass to my lips and silently wishing the dear little brunette all the blessings of this life ; at the same time not being unmindful that great wishes have great failures.

Mr Townsend having asked if Leonard should decant another bottle of the undeniable '34 port, and being assured that nothing would induce us to take more, I and Mr Rodway adjourned to the smoking-room, for a cigarette, before joining the ladies in the drawing-room, whilst our host enjoyed his siesta in the corpulent arm-chair, which was his usual custom after dinner.

“Well, Nora,” said Mrs Townsend, as she deposited her graceful figure on one of the luxurious couches in the drawing-room, at the same time arranging the rustling folds of her robes, “what do you think of our guest?”

Nora played with the swansdown that encircled her fan, in an abstracted manner, but made no immediate reply.

“I think him awfully nice,” ventured Gertrude, as she twirled her nymph-like form to a favourite waltz, with an imaginary partner.

“Nora is mum,” said Mrs Townsend cynically.

“I beg pardon, mamma, I was at that moment thinking how imprudent it would be to express an opinion respecting a person we have known but a few hours.”

“First impressions, my dear,” responded Mrs Townsend, “as a rule, are pretty reliable.

For my own part, I made the necessary deductions almost at sight, and I will venture to say that I am not very far wrong in the estimate I have formed."

"I am not gifted," replied Nora, "with that keen power of discrimination which you appear to possess; and I cannot help thinking that one may do another very considerable injustice, by too hastily forming an opinion."

Mrs Townsend curled her lip significantly.

"He certainly won't perish from a fatal attachment to the bottle, for he scarcely drank anything during the dinner," cut in Gertrude, trying another circular movement, and humming the tune of an old "stop waltz."

"What on earth, Gertrude, do you know about such matters," said Mrs Townsend, a little bitterly, thinking that it was a slap at her nephew; "neither of you are 'up'

to the ways of men yet. When you have lived as long in the world as I have, and mixed with the rough and the smooth in the busy hum of society, you will find out that dissipation and freedom of speech seldom commence until our backs are turned; and then men snuggle up together, all restraint is thrown off, and it is a case of ‘Flow on, thou shining river.’ Bear in mind, children, I am an observant woman, and nothing escapes me—nothing.”

Nora was silent, but she compressed her lips, and thought, “How spiteful, and, in many instances, how untrue.”

That little oddity, Gertrude, tried a ruse, saying,—

“Cousin Cuth was in splendid form to-night. What a brilliant flow of wit he has, mamma, and how nice he looked; didn’t he?”

At the same time the provoking creature made a wry face at Nora behind her fan,

and it was fortunate for that young lady that her mother didn't witness it.

"Your dear cousin," said Mrs Townsend, with sweet accents, "is one of the most refined and accomplished gentlemen one ever need wish to meet. He has a noble heart, a generous disposition—in a word, he is a lovable fellow altogether; don't you think so, Nora?"

"I know that Cuthbert is supposed to be very rich," replied Nora, with affected ease; "and I know that the world hurrahs at prosperity. I grant you that my cousin is, in the estimation of some people, a most lovable 'fellow.'"

Mrs Townsend winced a trifle under a lash that could not fail to leave its certain mark. Her step-daughter's observations were unanswerable; and Julia was alive to the fact that Nora had a little thong to her tongue!

“I consider him an angel, minus wings,” ventured Gertrude jocosely.

“Fiddlesticks ! Gerty, you are always making silly remarks. I am quite sure you both love my nephew, although Nora is so reticent—”

“I adore him down to the ground, as papa calls it,” said Gertrude ; “in fact, I am appallingly fond of him : and I know Nora is ready to devour him,—rings, collar, cuffs, diamond studs, and all—ahem !”

“I beg of you, Gertrude, to speak for yourself only,” interrupted Nora, looking daggers at her step-sister.

“It struck me very forcibly,” said Mrs Townsend, “that Cuthbert was disappointed at not taking you down to dinner, Nora. How did it happen ?”

“I haven’t the least notion ; neither do I care a ‘fig’ who took me down.”

“But, Nora dear, although to-day ours

was a little unconventional dinner, yet there are conventionalities of society which must not be lost sight of, but which you frequently disregard."

"To tell you the truth, mamma," said Gertrude, "just at that particular moment when our gallant and very presentable cousin was about to offer Nora his arm, I was suddenly seized with a fit of jealousy, and offered him mine. I gained a point, don't you see, and scored one!"

"And had the politeness to leave your sister out in the cold," added Mrs Townsend.

"I am never in the cold, mamma," said Nora, slightly colouring, "when I am near the warm heart of my father."

Mrs Townsend coughed, made no reply, but leant down and seized her white poodle by the neck, and nestled him in her arms.

"I vote we try our melodious voices at the piano," suggested Gertrude. "Ten to

one, Nora, if you but sing ‘Good-bye, Sweetheart, Good-bye,’ with your accustomed skill, you will wake up some of those gentlemen in the dining-room like anything,” and Gertrude frisked to the piano, selected the piece in question, adjusted the stool to its proper height, and insisted on her sister singing, saying,—“Now give it any amount of crescendo, and I will leave the door ajar.”

If our heroine possessed one accomplishment which excelled all others, it was that of singing. Educated when very young by the best masters that could be obtained, and aided by her natural sweet and powerful voice, her singing was simply as nearly perfection as it could be : she would sometimes devote hours in rendering, with great pathos, selections from Moore’s Irish Melodies, accompanying herself on the harp—her favourite instrument—which she played with consummate skill.

“Sissy, are you coming to sing, or are you not? I am getting impatient.”

And Nora went to the piano, and gave her heart and soul to the simple ballad. She had scarcely finished the last words, which sweetly echoed through the great corridor, when Cuthbert sauntered into the room, with a face as red as a peony, warbling the refrain of Nora’s song.

“Didn’t I tell you, Nora, that you would just about bring our cousin to life?”

“Egad!” said Cuthbert, “who could remain dead, whilst cherubim continually do sing? ha! ha! ha!”

“And seraphim join like anything,” added Gertrude, in her mimicking way.

“Fie! Gerty, fie! I am astonished at you!” said Mrs Townsend reproachfully. “Ah, Major Grey, I am glad you are come to the rescue; I hope you will keep these young people in order.”

I had been listening on the landing to Mrs Snowdon's singing, and my heart was swelling within me as she poured forth, with brilliant rendering, the beautiful ballad. On my entering the room, our heroine commenced Thalberg's "Last Rose of Summer," with variations; I immediately approached the piano, with the view of turning over the leaves for her, but, in my excitement, I did not accurately follow the music, and was therefore at fault at the bottom of the first page (who hasn't been, at some time or other, under similar circumstances), and never shall I forget the thrill that passed through my heart when Nora threw up her large frank eyes into my face;—her blush was a symbol of modesty and beauty, and she looked at me as it were out of heaven! As a matter of course, I again bungled at the leaves, turning over two instead of one; the play on her coral lips denoted that she rather enjoyed the mishap

than otherwise, as she readjusted the music, and smiled complacently. Mrs Snowdon's exquisite touch, as her fingers glided over the key-board, and the marvellous expression with which she played some brilliant sonatas, spoke its own language of a soul of the highest order for music.

"You sing, I presume, Major Grey," said Nora, pausing at the end of one of her superb runs, to remove two half-hoop diamond rings that interfered with her playing.

"I cannot say that I do not, Mrs Snowdon ; but I should like to qualify my answer by intimating, at the earliest moment, that my proficiency in that direction is exceedingly limited."

"You read music rapidly, I perceive," said Nora, with a flourish of her left hand on the key-board.

"Did you perceive it, Mrs Snowdon ? I almost fancy you intend that observation as a joke, seeing what a hash I—"

“No, really, Major Grey, believe me, I never gave it a thought. What a luxury it is,” went on Nora, “and pleasant pastime, to be able to take up all the good music that comes out, and play at sight.”

“A gift, Mrs Snowdon, which, I am sorry to say, is not mine. Were I so blessed, I should spend many hours daily at the piano.”

“You play, do you not?” ventured Nora.

“Scarcely—”

“I really think, Major Grey, that it is you who are now joking; ‘scarcely’ is hardly the word for it. Do, pray, oblige us?”

“On my honour, Mrs Snowdon, my faculty for playing is very much on a par with my singing. Since I led a soldier’s life, and been invalided so long, I have had but few opportunities of keeping up my practice.”

“At the word “soldier” and “invalid” I saw the colour mantle her cheeks, and, in an instant, tone down to ashy paleness, as she

gathered in her drapery that surrounded the music-stool in graceful folds, and retired to the couch, where she entered into conversation with Mrs Townsend.

“Now, Cuthbert,” said the lady of the house, fanning herself, “give us the pleasure of your vocal powers. I know that you are not shy.”

I thought she laid the stress very considerably on the word “you,” and I began to think what a fool I had made of myself in not cheerfully responding to the gentle hints that Nora had thrown out importuning me to play and sing.

“Shy !” replied Cuthbert, twisting his moustache to an extreme point ; “did you ever know, dear aunt, a Rodway shy? (saving your presence, madam)—just the reverse. I always feel an infinity of pleasure in contributing my quota to the evening’s amusement, more particularly when I have the delectable oppor-

tunity of sharing those pleasures with my accomplished cousins."

Mrs Townsend said within herself, "Very good indeed."

"You are an angel, Cuthbert!" exclaimed Gertrude enthusiastically. "I always thought you divine!—and oh! can't you sing, just a few!"

Mrs Townsend cast a reproachful glance at her daughter, who didn't seem to care a 'fig' what she said.

I could see by the cloud that passed over Mr Rodway's brow, that he did not relish Miss Townsend's stinging sarcasm, as he replied, with affected ease,—

"You know, dear Gerty, I am always very much at your service, but it strikes me most forcibly that I am a kind of pin-cushion, in which you are everlastingly, but jocosely, sticking in your sharp points. Take care, my amiable cousin, that you don't prick a vital part."

“You know, dear Cuth, that, so far as your heart is concerned, it is invulnerable; I couldn’t reach it—no, if I were to try ever so!—not even with a stocking-needle.”

“As marriage is an excellent conservator of youthful morals, I recommend you to go ‘in’ for that sort of thing, Miss Gertrude Townsend,” replied Mr Rodway, adjusting his collar and cravat with an air of importance (which, by-the-bye, was tied with clerical skill).

‘And don’t you know,’ went on Gertrude, “that you are sometimes like the fish-hawk down on this poor simple minnow; but, come, let us change the subject,—I don’t care if I do sing a duet with you. What do you say to ‘Norma?’ you are charming at that,” and the light-hearted girl tripped up to the piano humming—

“‘Hear me, Nora, in pity hear me.’

I beg pardon, I should have said, ‘Hear me, Norma;’ I hope no offence, Mrs Snowdon.”

Everyone laughed, except Nora, who made up her mind to give her step-sister a good scolding, when a favourable opportunity should occur, which she did later on.

Mr Rodway and Miss Townsend sang the duet most harmoniously, his highly-cultivated tenor voice, with its rich upper notes, sweetly blended with Gertrude's, who contributed her quota with much pathos, and in perfect tune ; but she could not compare favourably with Mrs Snowdon's singing, which was simply perfection, and which filled me with emotion I never felt before.

I knew that Mrs Snowdon would not be likely to give me another hint about either singing or playing—neither did I wish it ; for Mr Rodway had so completely eclipsed anything I was capable of doing, that (to tell the truth) I dreaded the light and shade ; but my misery was slowly but surely being consummated. I knew that Gertrude meant mischief,

and would not be denied, as she extracted two corpulent music books from the waggon, and made towards me, smiling benignly, and with silken tones said,—

“I am sure, Major Grey, that you will be able to select a song from this batch ; you will find herein anything and everything suitable to your taste : sacred, sentimental, comic, and heroic ; from the simple ballad all the way up the ladder to the best operas. Here we have sacred and secular music—Handel, Haydn, Bellini, Donizetti, and I don’t know what besides. Now don’t laugh ; and,” she went on, “you have a singing face, and I feel assured you can play like ‘ anything.’ ”

“I trust you will not be disappointed,” I replied.

I knew that all eyes were upon me in anxious expectation, as there was a general buzz of acclamation, followed by a mysterious silence. At that moment, I caught sight of Nora’s

sweet little *chaussure* peeping out from the folds of her dress, tattooing the floor; she was evidently agitated. I soon ran my eyes over some of the music, and, very much to the surprise of the little oddity who had so dexterously edged me into a corner, I selected a very old and favourite song of mine, which I was well “up” in, and which has for its title, “Hear me, Gentle Maritanna.”

I do verily believe Miss Townsend and Nora thought I was about to choose such a song as “Wapping Old Stairs,” or “Tom Bowling,” etc.

Happily I was in good voice, which, at the best, was nothing to boast of; suffice it to say I didn't break down, but was very near it once or twice, particularly when I caught sight of that charming little foot still drumming the floor. I put it to my benevolent friend and present reader, if he has not at some period of his life had a similar ordeal to pass through, under the eyes and ears of one whose favour

and esteem he most coveted; if so, I may fairly claim his indulgence, in what may otherwise appear (in my case) absurd nervousness. However, I got on better with a difficult piece which I played later in the evening, and thereby established myself as a fairly good, though moderate, musician; this much I will venture to say, without, I trust, a semblance of egotism.

During the intervals of music, I had a most delightful *tête-à-tête* with Mrs Snowdon. At times I found her musing in a pre-occupied way, sometimes exhibiting much vivacity, at others, very unemotional. Gleams of bright sunshine, as it were, would light up her countenance, alternating with gathering clouds; which convinced me that she had a heavy weight of trouble forcing itself, like the ivy leaf, so to speak, into every crevice of her sad heart. She scrupulously avoided touching upon any subject which bore, either directly or

indirectly, on matters connected with the war; evidently husbanding her resources for some future occasion, when she could find herself face to face with me alone. Although she knew that I had not entirely recovered from my wounds, no allusion was made to them.

Mr Rodway was very nearly causing an explosion which would have opened a mine of trouble; but, as quick as lightning, I went to the rescue. Taking him to a distant part of the room, under some pretence, I urged him not to refer in any way to the campaign, or the late Lieutenant Snowdon. Mr Rodway was quite alive to the kind feeling that actuated me, and it is due to that gentleman to say that with the warmest sentiments he expressed his approval, and promised to be on his guard.

The remainder of the evening was most agreeably spent; the light and shade por-

trayed in the various characters of the Townsend family were marvellously striking, —absolutely dissimilar in every respect; and I will pause for a moment in my narrative to record the impressions that were made upon my mental retina, during this the first day of my acquaintance with them.

In Mr Townsend I appear to have found a large-hearted fine specimen of an English gentleman; “one of the olden time;” compassionate; intelligent; generous; cheerful; strictly correct in the internal good conduct of his establishment; a fond father; and a firm friend!

In Mrs Townsend I found a lady of varied intelligence, with a highly-cultivated mind, and quick perception; at times, exhibiting gentle sympathy in her tones, humble, loving, and forbearing; at other times, flashes indicating a different temperament would appear, lighting up and

giving one a faint glimpse of what may probably be lying beneath the surface,—a second soul, so to speak,—a tongue with a dreadful thong, and which could occasionally puff out wrath, and at other times hold forth with silken and honeyed accents. A most patronising air would now and then be substituted for the humble, retiring demeanour which we all so much love to see women adorned with. Now a cloud of anger would gather on her face, in place of smiles and sensitive tears portrayed an hour or two since. Add to all these anomalies a lady expatiating on her family tree, with an exalted opinion of her own blood, and I venture to think that we have arrived at a fairly correct picture of the outward and visible form of the consort of Godfrey Townsend,—that which is hidden, will, like a cork submerged in the water, soon find its way to the surface.

I select a new pen at this juncture and replenish my inkstand, to trace a faithful representation of the lady whose portraiture I have the pleasure and privilege of exhibiting—it will, however, be very brief. Everyone who loves modesty, generosity, intelligence, frank kindness, and a simple and unobtrusive manner, must love our heroine. Such traits being a compound of her nature—"a thing of beauty is a joy for ever"—all who delight to look upon a graceful girl, with an affectionate and upright soul, must admire Nora Snowdon,—so real!

Gertrude is a very different stamp altogether;—brimful of innocent coquetry, bordering at times on frivolity; older in manner than her years justify, with a pair of blue eyes that sparkle with vivacity, her laughter cheers one like wine, and her playful, ready wit, scintillating sometimes in the most comic manner, not unfrequently bringing sunshine amidst domestic clouds.

CHAPTER XVIII.

A DAY IN THE "OPEN."

"Love is like honesty, much talked of, and little understood."

A FORTNIGHT has elapsed subsequent to the close of the last chapter, during which I spent a most delightful time at Carthewin Castle, riding, driving, shooting, fishing, and boating on the lake. I was frequently accompanied in these pastimes by Gertrude and Mr Rodway, but very rarely had I an opportunity of conversing with Nora, except at meal hours. She spent most of her time in her boudoir, or the "snuggery," which latter place, as before stated, was inaccessible to any person other than the family

and after the visitors had departed on their respective rounds of morning pleasure, our heroine usually adjourned to the library, sometimes appeared at luncheon, and not unfrequently asking to be excused from the usual unconventional eight o'clock dinner, on the plea of some slight indisposition. All these little manœuvres pointed to the fact of her having a very decided disinclination (the outcome of timidity) to confer with me on the painful subject which occasioned my visit to Carthewin Castle. Day after day passed without the slightest sign of Mrs Snowdon's inviting me to fulfil the object of my mission. It seemed that everyone was glad to keep the door closed, as it were, against an atmosphere that would naturally, when introduced, damp the spirits of those who had been so energetically striving to "cast dull care away;" but, day by day, I was keen enough to observe that Nora was

becoming more and more thoughtful, and tremulous in her voice, when holding a conversation with me; probably fearing every moment that I would launch out, and in one fell swoop clear the load that was accumulating within her breast, and thus expose her highly-sensitive nerves to a galvanic shock that, sooner or later, must be applied to them. It made my heart ache to see that pale face sometimes resting on her white thin hand, her eyes staring into vacancy, and in deep meditation; at other times she would glide in and out of the conservatory with assumed gaiety, and with a demeanour which I knew to be unreal—dodging all the guests of the house, avoiding, in every possible way, a conversation, except of a most promiscuous kind. Even poor Leonard gravely shook his head, and the old man's eyes filled with tears whenever he spoke of her to me; on one occasion saying, "Lord love her dear

heart, Major ; I wish I was a hangel in heaven, instead of a worn-out old butler, that I may come down and minister unto her. Try your hand, Major, try your hand ; take her out and about, and see what you can make of her. Lord love her ! I know she watches you from every window in the Castle like a cat would a mouse—bless her heart—but don't say, I said so."

In some of those endlessly pleasant gravel walks that interlaced the shrubbery, where Nora delighted, unobserved, to wander alone with a book, I sometimes ran up against her whilst I was indulging in my vesper cigar, and on those occasions, if I deciphered her countenance correctly, it was suggestive of a mixture of pleasure and grief, with sweet touches of sadness now and then portrayed in her demeanour. I always found her surpassing dexterous in the knowledge of most things, and with a mind alive to all the

beauties of nature and art. She was passionately fond of flowers, and never seemed tired of dilating on horticultural development, and rarely better pleased than when she was manipulating, from their earliest growth, the choice plants which the head gardener entrusted her with. I discovered another most striking trait in her character. It was that of the most profound reverence and love, which she inwardly felt and outwardly exhibited, towards aged persons and others who were oppressed or in trouble, not only within her own social circle, but amongst the poor of the parish and adjacent hamlets. A blush would sometimes creep over her pale face when any subject was touched upon where strict honour or integrity was wanting, then her large frank eyes flashed unmistakable signs of tumult within; on the other hand, when a good and gracious act, executed by one individual towards another at the right moment, and

with the purest and best intentions, came to her knowledge, she was quick to appreciate its worth, and treasure up next her heart those grains of gold! Many, many times since I penned these lines have I looked back with loving remembrance to those early days when Providence (not chance) brought me face to face, heart to heart, and soul to soul with that pure, sweet life, which shone like a lighthouse on all around her. In the words of a great novelist, I say,—

“Blessed he, who has the love of a good woman.”

But I am digressing, and must take my reader with me over other exciting scenes, and, perhaps, the most momentous and thrilling incident of my life, in connection with my visit to Carthewin Castle; but it is a task not easily accomplished, and I have more than once laid down my pen, only to take it again with increased earnestness and

many doubts, fearing that on my way I may fall short in portraying with due force and correctness the events of this ever memorable red-letter day — events that demand much from me, as one of the graceful tributes I can offer our heroine ; and fearing, too, that in recalling those bright and happy reminiscences, I may sail a little closely to the danger signal of egotism, and in my enthusiasm exceed somewhat the bounds of moderation ; but as facts and fiction are interwoven herein, and intimately bound up together, I should be wanting in love and gratitude if I did not produce at least one faithful portrait of the estimable lady with whom I have happily become associated ; but “ he that praises himself, is a debtor to all others.”

It was on a dull autumnal afternoon in the beginning of September, and the first few days in the “ open,” that Mr Townsend, Mr

Rodway, and myself were seated under one of the old oaks—those giant sons of the forest—that abound on the fringe of Carthewin coverts. We had been partridge shooting the whole of the morning, tramping along up to our knees in mangol, turnip, gorse, and stubble, and the bags that were thrown into the cart which brought up the lunch-basket from the "Townsend Arms" in the village, spoke their own language as to a faithful record of the leash of guns that were out that morning. Few better shots could be found in the county than Mr Townsend and Mr Rodway, particularly the latter, who, with two exceptions, killed right and left all day, How I envied him! notably when this deponent fired two barrels at an easy bird, and had the mortification of seeing Cuthbert drop it with his choke and wire cartridge at fifty yards!—how many times he did this before lunch time, I am ashamed to admit. Men

not unfrequently step into a turnip field or cover on wonderfully good terms with themselves, resolute in their determination to render a good account of their bag at the close of the day ; they grasp their gun with unusual firmness, compress their lips, become silent, actually in earnest, and looking and feeling like business “all over !” They try to quiet their nerves, but that is just the mistake, for it is the very rock on which sportsmen are usually wrecked ; the nerves decline to be subdued, hence the many misses. The little boy who has been brought up with the gun in his hand, has no nerves, so to speak ; he is always as cool as a trout, and, if he continue his shooting into manhood, he can invariably hold his own against all comers, and is absolutely reliable in all places, lights, wind, and weather. Such, however, is the writer’s experience. How thoroughly one enjoys the refreshing hour

from one to two under a lee hedge, in the middle of a crisp September day, with a well-stocked lunch-basket and the best of appetites, after a good four hours' spin in the "open," surrounded by a leash of dogs, staring at you with their limpid eyes, in eager anticipation of participating in the small scraps that may fall from the rich man's table ; if they intrude their noses a little too near the viands, and are severely rebuked by a vicious kick, how gentle and loving they are ! Speak but kindly to them, then note the intelligent tear glistening in their eyes, and the unbounded joy they manifest by the wag of their tail. Noble, unselfish, forbearing animals ! what sound, practical lessons they teach us ! The writer has had manifold opportunities of studying, and has experienced infinite pleasure in the companionship of many intelligent dogs ; and, if space would only permit, I could record numerous instances of the re-

markable sagacity exhibited by my old and much-beloved retriever "Captain;" but as such would be out of place in this narrative, I will simply offer this passing tribute to the memory of the grand old animal that followed me with his nose close to my heel, through many long seasons, sometimes under trying circumstances, endless disappointments, and (when rations were short) with, alas! an empty stomach! Yet how uncomplaining! how easily satisfied! Thrash him for disobedience, thump him for inattention, and in a moment after, though smarting with pain, he licks the very hand that chastised him! But "Captain," my trusted friend, my unselfish companion in long travel, at home and abroad, has passed away, and at the Woodlands, beneath a cedar of Lebanon whose large flat boughs have ofttimes screened us both from the pelting rain and the scorching sun, and where we have spent many happy

moments, and had many a jolly meal together, rest the remains of the grand old and faithful dog—once a host in himself!

"Why, Major Grey," said Mr Townsend, making a vigorous lunge with his fork into the lunch-basket, and empaling upon it the wing of a fowl, "you are not in your usual good form to-day; using a sporting phrase—not 'fit.'"

The setter Ranger looked me full in the face, and said, as it were,—*"Them be my sentiments."* The brute had experienced many disappointments under my gun during the day, and don't they enjoy a good kill!

"It does happen sometimes, Mr Townsend," I replied; "I cannot account for it, it is often a puzzle to me: kill all one day, miss all next."

"Perhaps you are in love?" said Rodway, fixing his restless keen eyes upon me inquiringly.

"Yes; I am in love."

"Ah! just so; that accounts for the milk

in the cocoa-nuts, as the saying is. I thought so. Those sort of things, don't you know, Grey, play the bear with a fellow sometimes, particularly if it isn't re-ci-pro-cal" (he pronounced it such), "and no error—ha ! ha ! ha !"

"You appear brimful of experience in these matters," I responded, with assumed gaiety.

"One can't shoot well, don't you know, in two directions at the same time, Major Grey. Drop your love, and you drop your birds—ha ! ha ! ha !"

The leash of dogs were unanimous in their approval of those remarks, judging by the oscillation of their tails, as they each sat up on their antipodes, hungry spectators. If dogs can't talk, they are mighty listeners !

"Let me see," went on Cuthbert, "what is it that Mr Shakespeare said,—

'Come, love and health to all !

Then I'll sit down ; give me some wine, fill full.'

at the same time tossing off a tumbler of old brown brandy, be it said, with little water.

"Cuthbert, my boy," said Mr Townsend, "why don't you stick to the pale ale. By Jove! sir, if you polish off sundry potations of spirituous liquor like that, I won't answer for the consequences when we resume work, though I don't think I shall shoot much more to-day."

"Never fear, uncle; you know I am a cautious bird."

"If you will allow me, master, to make so bold," said the head keeper, "all I got to say is, if some of them birds were a little more cautiouser, it would be better for their internals,—leastways, when Mr Cuthbert be looking over his barrels."

"Look here, muzzle-loader," said Rodway, "I know you are the hardest nut to crack in this county, and a hard hitter, and no error; notwithstanding, I will give you six pigeons

out of twenty, thirty yards rise, and shoot you for ten of my current coins of the realm, called sovereigns, against your liver-and-white spaniel 'Turn-over.'"

"Turn-over," who was looking on, didn't seem to see it : but perhaps he said within himself,—“ If you don't know, master, when you have a good servant, I know when I have a good master.”

“ Not if I know it, Mr Cuthbert,” said keeper. “ Excuse me making so bold, but 'taint quite level work ; three eyes to two, don't 'e see.”

“ What do you mean ? ”

“ Why, to tell you the plain truth, master, that bit o' round glass which you sticks up, is a hawful punisher ;—no getting up aside o' that lot—anyhow, you must get up pretty early, and have your breakfast over-night, to match it ; but, Mr Cuthbert, if you will drop telescope, or mikescope, magnifier, or whatever

they calls it, I'm your man any day ; that is, with master's permission."

"Turn-over" made tracks, disgusted !

"I'll have no betting on my estate," said Mr Townsend, a little warmly. "Don't you risk your spaniel, Drogget ; ten pounds is nothing to my nephew, and as to your dog 'Turn-over,' Mr Rodway breaks the tenth commandment every time he goes out with him."

After luncheon, Rodway lighted a cigar, and, shouldering his gun, strolled away in the woods with his valet in deep conversation, and I was left alone with Mr Townsend, who was evidently in deep thought, as, on more than one occasion, he appeared a little absent whenever I addressed him.

"Well, Major Grey," at last ventured the lord of the soil, "has Nora 'opened up' in any way to you on matters connected with her late husband?" at the same time fixing his penetrating eyes upon me.

“Not one syllable, sir,” I replied, pulling vigorously at my meerschaum, and sending a few circles of smoke into the air.

“Really ! how odd ! However,” went on Mr Townsend, after a short pause, “she purposes having a conversation with you to-day.”

“To-day !” I repeated, a little nervously.

“Yes. Before I left home this morning, Nora came to my dressing-room, and requested me to intimate to you, should a favourable opportunity occur, that she wished to have a strictly confidential interview at six o’clock, in the oak room ; that is, if it meet with your pleasure.”

“No pleasure, sir, can be so great to me as that which I shall derive in being of service to Mrs Snowdon or her august father.”

Mr Townsend bent his head approvingly, saying,—

“I most heartily reciprocate those kindly-expressed sentiments, Major Grey ; albeit

am very greatly afraid that your visit at the Castle on this special occasion is one which will not be productive of much pleasure to you."

"You would not say so, sir, if you but knew how supremely happy I have been during my sojourn here. Your unbounded hospitality, and the many graceful acts of kindness accorded me by Mrs Townsend and your good daughters, have filled me with emotion; indeed they are far more than I deserve, or ever dreamt of."

Again Mr Townsend gave me a searching look. I felt sure there was much in the background of his mind, as he kept twisting about his gold eyeglasses, and watching my countenance with marked vigilance; but I was armed, as Shakespeare has it, "So strong with honesty," that I could bear the full force of his scrutiny.

There was a long pause. All was silent, except the rustling of the oak and beech leaves,

the twitter of some sparrows, and the flight of the wood-pigeon homeward bound ;—that mysterious lull in the conversation which at times and under certain conditions is difficult to wrestle with ; so much so, that words obstinately stick in one's throat.

“ Ah ! me ! what a world this is,” at last ventured Mr Townsend, in a musing and pre-occupied way.

“ Not a bad world, sir,” I responded, “ provided the people in it would only act their parts conscientiously, and pull an honest oar in the struggle of life ; in which case, how happy and contented we should then be.”

“ But, Major Grey, we must all pull in the same direction, or else no good result will follow : one rusty nail in the mill will destroy and throw out of gear the whole machinery, don't you know ; and now,” went on Mr Townsend, “ I want to talk to you most seriously about my daughter.”

"With whom I shall have the pleasure of an interview at six o'clock," I remarked.

"Precisely ; albeit what you call pleasure would to me be intense pain. Of the latter, Heaven knows, I have had enough lately. But looking at things philosophically ; believing, as I do, that all things which happen are for the best ; and knowing that there is a silver lining to every cloud, I have little doubt but I shall eventually breathe in a very different atmosphere to that which I am now existing in."

I thought Mr Townsend said this in a somewhat piteous voice, so I replied,—

"Men, sir, not unfrequently fancy they see the future through a dark horoscope, and—"

"But to business," interrupted Mr Townsend. "Excuse my using the term, Major Grey, and suppose we saunter together to yonder lonely nook in the glen, where we need not speak beneath the breath."

“With pleasure,” I said.

“Ah, my friend, it is all pleasure with you,” murmured Mr Townsend.

“Not at all, sir, every heart knoweth its own bitterness, its own sadness; and at no period of my life have I ever felt intoxicated with pleasure.”

“All to come, my young friend, all to come,” replied Mr Townsend, with a warm expression of countenance, and a gentle squeeze of the right arm, as he interlaced his in mine, and we picked our way through the rugged defile that led to the glen.

“It was here in this secluded spot,” said Mr Townsend, with tears in his eyes, “that my ever-lamented and much-beloved wife, the fond mother of my Nora, wandered so much alone. Every nook and tree, could they but speak, would tell long tales of the joyous moments she spent amidst this dense foliage. Truly she was an ornament

to society, a bright shining star, a woman of undeviating rectitude, mild benevolence, and keen sense of duty and morality."

"I have heard my good mother often speak of the late Mrs Townsend," I replied. "She was intimately acquainted with my aunt in early days, with whom she spent some time at Derwentwater, near Windermere, and from whom she received many graceful acts of kindness."

"Her name?" asked Mr Townsend, again fixing his keen eyes upon me.

"Podmore,—daughter of Anthony Podmore, of Brook Castle. My mother was a Miss Podmore."

"What!" exclaimed Mr Townsend vehemently, "your mother a Miss Podmore! you don't speak it!"

"Did you know my aunt, sir?"

"Know her! Next to my lamented wife, I knew no one more gentle, more amiable,

more lovable, and chaste than Clara Podmore. I could a tale unfold—a long, sweet, sad tale—that I never grow tired of telling, so full of the happiest recollections of my college life. And you her nephew!—your mother her sister!—you, now standing before me in this glen, speaking of Clara Podmore, poor little bright-eyed Clara Podmore, now a bright speck a long long way up! Yes, truly, she loved as Rachel loved Jacob. Well, well—but more anon. Some day, perhaps, yes, some day, Grey, we may resume this happy yet sad subject. And now to the main point, for I have lamentably digressed.”

“The digression, sir, has interested me immensely; and I am rejoiced to know that at least one member of my family has been held in high esteem by a gentleman whose friendship I so much value.”

“And which cannot be forfeited, so long as you continue in the straight course

and lead the exemplary life that I know is yours," responded Mr Townsend.

"You think too well of me, sir; I have not yet earned that golden opinion, therefore I have no title to it."

At that moment Nora entered my thoughts.

"It is now three o'clock," said Mr Townsend, "and you are to see my daughter at six. I am uncommonly anxious about her, and for the life of me I cannot shake off the depression that weighs so heavily upon my poor child. She is simply going to a shadow, and if a change do not soon take place, I fear God will think fit, in His infinite goodness, to snatch away my precious ewe lamb."

I replied, in the words of the poet,—

"Earth hath no sorrows that Heaven cannot heal;" also, "God can dry the mourner's tears."

"True that," responded Mr Townsend,

“but my child has had a crushing blow, Grey, and I wish to impress upon you how absolutely essential it is to keep nothing from her appertaining to her late husband. Nora is a curious compound, a sweet disposition, highly sensitive, with noble feelings; I have the measure of her heart to a nicety. With well-directed tact and kindly feeling, with which I know your nature is charged, I wish you to go to her rescue; you, and you alone, have the king key that will unlock the well of tears that is now inwardly killing her. Yes, for months past her eyes have been dry as hay. It will be false delicacy to hide from her the thrilling scene that closed the chapter of poor Snowdon's career. I wish you to dilate on his life as you found it; to expatiate on his expiring moments, with all its dismal surroundings, as impressed at the time upon you. Conceal nothing;

give it all the force and expression at your command; add not one iota to the melancholy scene with which you are familiar; neither give it the slightest colouring, nor keep back a wish, a message, nor an injunction of her departed hero, however harrowing it may apparently be to her feelings, or painful to yourself, else you will do more harm than good. I am satisfied that behind those poor sunken eyes of my child there is a flood of scorching tears,—they must be relieved at all cost, at all risk; and if you fail in the attempt, Lord help her! Her mind will, I fear, become a blank,—a sweet thing of the past; and I—I—no matter what!" and the massive head of that handsome man fell buried in his hands.

Strong as my frame was, and accustomed to thrilling scenes, yet the paternal affection portrayed in this splendid fellow absolutely unnerved me, so much so, I could scarcely

utter a word ; albeit I pulled myself together, resolutely saying,—

“ I will not add, sir, one sentence that may harrow up your feelings. I take the instructions of my general, so to speak, and, like a good soldier, will carry out your wishes. The trial to me will be great, yet greater to your daughter. If I fail in the attempt, you will, at least, know that I have religiously performed my duty. I have to play in this sad business a part which unlooked-for circumstances have placed me in, and which may bear, as I proceed, the stamp of egotism. I have also to ingratiate myself with materials at my command in the probable favour of your daughter. Nevertheless, I will advance to acquire the end you desire ; but never shall it be recorded that Oliver Grey made capital out of those materials. More, sir, I cannot say ; but ere I move one step, it is due to my honour,

and it is due to the absolute confidence you have reposed in me, to speak out plainly and without reserve."

Mr Townsend squeezed my hand affectionately, and in a low tone said,—

"I place, my good fellow, the most implicit confidence in you. May God give you strength to go through the work. Mrs Townsend and Cuthbert are going to drive over and dine with me at the abbey, as I have to meet my steward there. You, Nora, and Gertrude will have your quiet little dinner together after concluding your *tête-à-tête*. Not one word, please, to anyone respecting this interview."

"Most certainly not," I replied.

At this moment Rodway, his valet Martineaux, and one keeper appeared in the distance; I therefore lifted my hat to Mr Townsend, shouldered my gun, and made some rapid strides over the golden gorse,

and on through the “higher starts” farm towards Carthewin Castle.

I felt greatly perplexed, on reviewing the conversation which I had just had with Mr Townsend. There was, I knew, a tenderness and mystery unfathomable in Nora. In a few short hours I should, no doubt, be in possession of her inmost thoughts and wishes.

“How eminently handsome she looked last night,” I soliloquised. “Notwithstanding the attention I paid her, there was a considerable stand-offishness in her demeanour,—a distant *hauteur*,—and very imperturbable. Dear Nora, the ideal woman I have so long pictured ! you little know the galvanic thrills that the sight of your picture and its original have created in my breast ; added to which, the memory of past days,—of one whose name you bear,” and thus I dreamily dwelt, as I tramped along

over arable, grass, stubble, and heather-covered knolls, blowing away at my meerschäum, full of anxious thoughts for the coming interview.

The sickle-shaped moon, with her pale crescent, was now in view in the steel-grey sky. The cows came lowing from the windmill meadow to the home farm. I paused at the head of the broad lake. It was an enchanting spot, full of poetry. The lofty trees throwing their gaunt shadows athwart the greensward beneath. The monotonous ripple of the numerous streamlets, as they meandered their way down the precipitate slopes of the sidelands, could be distinctly heard; and I heard, too, the Castle clock strike sweetly in the silent air, as I turned towards the courtyard and the grand old tower that stood grim in the western sky.

Having deposited my breechloader in the gun-room, and exchanged my shooting-boots

(to which there was attached at least four pounds of arable soil), adjusted a clean pair of gaiters, and had a good pull at my brandy-flask by way of a fortifier, I strolled leisurely along the broad terrace to the east end of the castle, on which side I could take a passing glance at the oak room, in the hope of seeing Nora. I paced up and down with a well-measured military tread, and took a promiscuous look through the casement, but Nora was not to be seen. I then entered the Castle, and met Leonard in the hall.

“ I hope you have had good sport, Major ? ”

“ Yes, thank you, Leonard ; excellent.”

“ Birds are very shy, sir, so they tell me.”

“ Very.”

“ Mr Cuthbert is a ‘ customer,’ isn’t he, sir ? ”

“ A what, Leonard ? ”

“ A ‘ dead nail ’ I mean, Major.”

"Yes, a very remarkable shot, Leonard."

"Not over careful about handling his gun and covering his neighbour, so they say."

"Indeed! I did not observe it."

"What everybody says, I s'pose must be true," replied Leonard, tugging away at the corners of his waistcoat nervously.

It occurred to me that the old man ventured these remarks in a very mysterious manner: the curl of his lip and the expression of his countenance were altogether suggestive.

"Mrs Snowdon in, Leonard?" I asked, in a casual way, at the same time sipping a very hot cup of tea that the footman had served me with in the spacious hall, where I was ensconced in a luxurious arm-chair before a blazing logwood fire that crackled fiercely, and surrounded by many lay figures in armour clad.

"Miss Nora" (the old man found it difficult

to call her anything else), “sent for me a half an hour since, to ask if you had returned, sir; and when I told her you hadn’t, Lord love her heart! she heaved up such a sigh, and said I was to let her know the moment you arrived, as she had an appointment with you in the oak room on business matters of importance, and on no account was I to have you disturbed. Lord love her! trust me for that.”

“I am very much at Mrs Snowdon’s service, Leonard, if it be agreeable for her to see me now.”

“Agreeable, Major!” replied Leonard, giving another tug at his waiscoat. “Bless her soul,” he continued, in a whisper, “I can read my dear little mistress, my rosebud, as I call her from her cradle, like a book with the largest type. She has been dying this fortnight to have somethink over with you; she has been a fretting and fuming all about

the Castle, crazed like. More than once I tried to pacify her, for, do you know, Major, she will generally listen to me ; but lately she has snapped my old head off the moment I opened my mouth. Love her tender heart ! if she only knew what restless nights I have had about her. Often do I crawl from my warm bed in the small hours, regardless of the rheumatics, and creep down the main staircase to her room door, and listen to hear if things are all right ; for I have lately had some awful dreams about her, and I start up, and I can't for the life of me get a wink of sleep till I have satisfied myself nothing has gone wrong. Love her heart ! if anything happened to that child, good-bye to Leonard !”

“You are a faithful servant,” I replied sympathetically, “and you will have your reward.”

“Reward, Major, I want no reward, but a continuation of that regard she bears old

Leonard. I've fed on it for years past,—yes, from her very cradle upwards; take it away, and I shall starve to death, that's what I should."

"Cheer up, my good man, all will go well; time works wonders; Mrs Snowdon will doubtless be herself again soon."

"Time must be pretty quick about it then, Major, for there aint much left of her. I watch her at meal times, and she picks and picks over her food, and hides all the meat, so cute like, under her vegetables, and passes all the best little tit-bits I hand her—there. She don't eat enough to keep a mouse alive. I've got my eye on her plate, when she little thinks I am watching her; it makes me that sad and nervous, I am ready to choke: nobody else seems to notice it—not nobody. I did say to missis the other morning, 'Please ma'm, I hope no offence, but poor missy don't eat not no food,' and she flared up, and said,—

‘Who’s poor missy?’ and when I told her—my crickey! didn’t she warm me up a ‘few;’ didn’t she, that’s all! She told me to keep my place, and dared me ever to address her again on the subject. She did say in her flare up,—‘’Tis nothing but Mrs Snowdon’s wretched temper!’ Temper, Major! why, missy’s got the temper of a lovely white hangel—and a hangel she is, love her heart! But, hark! there’s her bell, by Jove!—back in a minute, Major,” and the good old man bustled through the corridor as though he owned but twenty summers. He returned in a few minutes, saying,—“Missy knows you have returned, and she wishes to see you at once. For pity’s sake, Major, don’t say a word about what I told you.”

“Not for the universe, Leonard.”

I was just leaving the hall, when the poor fellow gently took hold of my arm, and, in soft accents, said,—

“ I am an old man, Major, with more than one foot in the grave. I have dangled that blessed child, like a tender mother, on my knee. I know that you will forgive me ; but you can save her, you can save her ! For God’s sake don’t be shy ; out with it like a man, like a bold brave soldier, that you are. No one living but myself knows what is in dear missy’s mind. The ball, Major, is rolling at your feet, which Mr Cuthbert is moving heaven and earth to pick up. Curse him ! God forgive me for saying so.”

I could not trust myself to reply, but as I hastened to the oak room, I pressed the faithful old man’s hand so affectionately, that I made him wince. It was an earnest of my intention to carry out his wishes—which, to tell the reader the truth, were identical with my own.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE LONG-LOOKED-FOR INTERVIEW.

“I MUST ask your forgiveness, Mrs Snowdon, for not being punctual ; I hope you are not angry.”

“Not at all, Major Grey ; it is so good of you to come. I trust I have not been the means of depriving you of other pleasures.”

“I know of none that can equal the pleasure I now feel,” I responded, gently taking the pretty dimpled hand offered, which she immediately withdrew, not allowing me to retain it even a few seconds ; and, fixing her eyes on the oak flooring, said,—

“Pray be seated, Major Grey. My father has told you, no doubt, how desirous I am

of having a conversation with you on the subject of your letter to him."

"Your good father intimated to me, an hour or two since, your wish ; and, agreeably with it, I am here, to give you, in detail, so much information respecting the late Lieutenant Snowdon as you may be anxious to hear, and prepared to receive. Indeed I have been anticipating this interview for some time past."

"You were a very dear personal friend of my lamented husband, I think," she replied, determined at once to go to the point.

"I had the privilege of sharing his friendship, Mrs Snowdon."

"And he, poor dear, had the privilege and pleasure of sharing your friendship ; of this I have ample proof," responded Nora, with a deep, weary sigh.

"Yes, dear madam ; in a word, we loved each other."

“You loved each other,” echoed Nora, with peculiar emphasis.

“Long travel and the closest intimacy, extending over many years, amid varying fortunes, success and non-success, intimately bound our hearts together in friendship.”

“Intimately bound your hearts together in friendship?” again echoed Nora, placing her little hand on her left breast; then she paused awhile.

“Poor Percy was a noble fellow,” I said.

“My husband was a noble fellow, in the strictest sense of the term. In the words of the great bard, I say,—‘Thus this man died, leaving his death for an example of a noble courage, and a memorial of virtue.’ If,” continued Mrs Snowdon, “the memory of the past will permit you to give utterance to the facts, pray tell me the whole sad story, that I have so longed to hear from your lips, and which I had not the courage to solicit before.”

“Yes,” I replied, “the story is a sad one.”

“But, doubtless, it has a bright side,” responded Nora impressively.

“Yes, Mrs Snowdon, a side so lustrous, that the memory of it will ever be a shining light to me.”

For the first time she fixed her large frank eyes upon me in the most unemotional manner, and in measured accents said,—

“You saw him fall?”

“Not quite so; your husband was in the thickest of the fight with me, and bore, as it were, for some time a charmed life, leading our brave fellows to victory amidst a storm of bullets.”

“And one found its billet in the heart of my brave hero. Go on, Major Grey, I am prepared for the worst, but the worst, after all, may be best.”

At this point I thought of Mr Townsend’s words,—“My daughter is a strange compound.”

“I was wounded and carried away,” I continued, “but, reviving for a while, and not being dangerously hit, I went in search of my dear old boy, as I called him.”

“Your dear old boy!” repeated Nora, tattooing the oak floor with her little foot. “Well, what then?”

“I found him leaning his head on the breast of a gunner.”

“Living or dead?” anxiously.

“Living.”

“Sensible or insensible?”

“Perfectly sensible.”

“Perfectly sensible! God be praised!” responded Nora. “I shall now be rewarded for all the anxious days and nights I have spent. Pray proceed, Major Grey.”

“I shall not depress you, I hope, by recapitulating those harrowing scenes?”

“On the contrary, you will support me, and quench the thirst I have. Pray, kindly

take this chair" (pointing to one immediately in front of her), "that I may lose nothing in the telling; that I may see the man who acted the part of the good Samaritan; and that I may all the more fully realise the closing scene of my beloved husband's life."

I took the invited chair, and I also again took (I know not how I came to do it) her little white trembling hand in mine—oh, so cold!—saying,—

"I have much to impart;—a long, sad story, yet full of sweet sadness,—more, perhaps, than you are well able to bear. Say, shall we reserve the rest for to-morrow?"

Nora nervously disengaged her hand from mine, and, drawing herself up with a lofty air, replied,—

"I have solicited your help, Major Grey; I have asked you, in pleading tones, to grant me one favour; it is the first, and may be it will be the last I shall ever ask of you; there

is no man, other than yourself, who can accord it me. For the love you say you bore my Percy, in pity spare the punishment you inflict by keeping this information from me."

I said within myself, "Now I am 'in for it,' and must go through the work." Nora seemed to me a child in stature, but a woman with a powerful brain and strong sense, somehow altogether unlike the Nora I had been visiting so long. I could have taken the bright little atom in my strong arms, and fervently impressed on her lips the seal of my devotion ; but with her it was—Stand off, sir, I know you not : grant my desire, and depart. Such feelings at the moment suggested themselves to my mind. Her grace and beauty bewildered me ; and as I looked on that sweet, flushed face, I thought of poor Percy, and

The Shadow in the Gold."

"You mistake me. I have no desire, Mrs Snowdon, to keep anything from you. I am

simply actuated by the kindest and best directed motives ; believe me sincere when I assure you of this."

"I know you to be sincere, else I should not now be importuning you," responded Nora, in an under tone. "Pray continue."

"Percy was carried into my tent."

"Yes, he was carried into your tent. What then ?"

"I found he was dying. I asked him if he were thirsty. He replied 'Very ;' but it was not the thirst to which I referred. At his request I read a portion of a chapter from this book" (I withdrew from my pocket the identical Bible Percy gave me upon trust), "in which a marker was placed bearing the inscription, 'Firm as a Rock,' and a hand pointing to the fifty-fifth chapter of Isaiah, 'Ho every one that thirsteth,' etc."

At this juncture I saw Nora turn deadly pale, and grasp the arm of the chair ; but her

soft eyes were not gleaming through diamond tears ; and I said to myself “ If tears are to be had, I shall extract them now, or never ! ”

“ Yes ! ” exclaimed Nora, “ this is the book—this the marker—and this, too, the little hand I drew ! Alas ! I knew not then the end to which I was directed.” Our heroine clasped her hands, and, looking me full in the face, went on,—“ Oh, for pity’s sake, say, say, did, he mention my name—just one little word—Nora ? ”

“ Bear with me, dear Mrs Snowdon, one moment, and we will arrive at that point in due time.”

“ Forgive my anxiety, Major Grey.”

The clouds, I knew, were gathering, and the tears surely and slowly welling to the surface. I then continued my narrative, word for word, all that Percy said to me in his dying moments. I related everything with sensational accents ; and I am not ashamed

to own that I did not disguise a bumping tear which trickled down my cheek, splashing on her hand as I leant over her. I then came to that point which, no doubt, will be in the recollection of the reader, where Percy threw the locket round my neck, saying,—
“Wear it, Oliver, wear it for my sake; and when you look on the reflex of the fair face of my Nora in that little circle of gold, it may remind you of the closest and dearest tie of your devoted friend. Should you, in your travels find yourself face to face with the original, give her this Bible and marker, and say that the former was the most precious gift I ever possessed. Tell her it proved a healing balm to the ugly wound here, and it has fortified my soul for its journey through the long valley I am about to enter.”

“You buried him, Major Grey; you—yes—you.”

“I buried the mortal remains of your husband;

but not all of him. Oh ! no ! not all ; we know where to look for that great noble soul."

"These hands closed my dear one's eyes," murmured Nora, just touching my brown fingers.

"These hands closed your husband's eyes," I responded.

I saw that sweet pale face drop silently and slowly into her white cambric handkerchief ; I knew that the lightning, so to speak, had struck the long-closed portals, and a flood of tears poured forth. They came as a refreshing summer shower to the scorched-up rosebud that was withering for the want of moisture ; they burst forth as a harbinger of joy, like a sweet spring tide that waters the parched meadows. Sobs that were hitherto strangled in her throat gained the ascendancy ; fast and thick they came. That sad heart was overflowing ;—poor Nora was saved.

I gently placed my hand upon our heroine's shoulder, in the hope of comforting her, which, however, she immediately removed, saying,—“Oh, leave me, Major Grey, leave me—for pity's sake leave me; I cannot,—I cannot hear more!”

I took her cold damp hand in mine—she did not withdraw it; I felt her life blood tingle, as it were, through my veins; I pressed it gently and respectfully to my lips; how I came to do it, Heaven only knows!—her wealth of hair had fallen down in circles and semi-circles around her spotless neck; another subdued sob, “Oh, leave me!” and in a moment I was hastening from the room, when lo! to my horror, I perceived a man's cadaverous face flattened against the glass of the window casement, glaring at me!

I quietly closed the door, rushed through the long corridor, nearly knocking over

one of the lay figures of a knight in armour, who seemed, as it were, to intercept me ; I plunged into the courtyard, scaled a low parapet that led to the terrace, and with a few strides I was at the casement where I saw that great white face. No one, however, was to be seen there ; all was silent, except the tinkling of the goat-bells on the mountain side, and the bleating of some sheep in the distance ; the wind was at rest ; and the old Castle clock, in measured deep tones, struck seven.

CHAPTER XX.

DARK SCHEMES, AND BREAKERS AHEAD.

“One day of domestic felicity is worth a year of public gaiety.”

THE sun is shining brightly on Carthewin Castle ; it is Sunday morning ; the bells of the parish church, distant about a mile from the home park, denote that the Lord's day has arrived. The welcome sound of those bells fell like sweet music on the ears of the inmates of the noble building. Godfrey Townsend was a God-fearing man. Though not what we should call in homely phraseology “strait-laced,” he was, nevertheless, strict in all matters appertaining to the holy day of rest.

The sky is serene, the soft crisp September wind is invigorating. If the reader be refined by the hallowed fire of devotional feeling, let us journey together from Carthewin Castle to the very picturesque church, *via* the gigantic trees of Lebanon, through the vast park, under the gaunt shadows of the lofty sons of the forest, that spread their wealth of branches in all directions. The rustling of the leaves of the lime trees, the gnarled oak and the ash, seem, as it were, to whisper glad tidings to those who seek God's holy house. It is a lovely walk from the Castle to the church, a walk that elevates the spirits, and imparts an unusual ecstacy of feeling. The broad lake, that almost encircles the vast demesne, flows silently on; the weeping willows gracefully bend their pale boughs to the water's edge, reflecting the shadows on the shiny surface; the dappled and silent deer

are browsing on the greensward; the bold view of an extensive landscape, and the lofty hills in the distance, towering one above the other, keeping, as it were, watch over the sublime work of the Creator, are in all respects glorious scenes of reality. If you are not weary, let us proceed further. The sun is rising in his splendour, the winds are almost at rest, no clouds obscure the heavens in gloom; in a word, it is a delightful Sabbath morning, and one seems to experience in it an antidote for human perplexities. See yon widow with her three helpless children wending their way to Carthewin Church, where lie the remains of the bread-winner of the family, resting in the primitive churchyard, after long years of toil, awaiting the final day, and a rich reward "for talents wisely spent." Good George Bowden (as he was called) was a God-fearing man, much beloved, and his

widow and children now reap the fruit of his good work, for they are the recipients of the bounty of the lord of the soil, who will never allow them to want.

Nora has always taken a lively interest in the welfare of the poor of the parish ; her life from early childhood has been devoted in seeking every opportunity that presented itself, in ministering to the wants of the sick and needy. She delighted in following in the footsteps of her lamented mother, whose good actions and pious memory are household words spoken in every cottage and homestead on the estate. There is scarcely a poor family in the neighbourhood and adjacent hamlets who has not, at some time or other, experienced the bright influence of her counsel, and the warmth of her generous nature. When sorrows and misfortunes sorely oppressed them, and joys were suddenly torn away, truly she was a sympathising friend, a wise

counsellor, and a ready helper. Let us journey together by the side of the pellucid river, and over the rustic bridge that leads to Carthewin Church. The service has not yet commenced, but we can have just a peep at the interior. Lightly tread, it is hallowed ground ! softly, if you please ; a beautiful girl, in deep mourning, is kneeling at the foot of the white monument near the chancel. Draw nearer—nearer still ; see the outlines of the marble profile ! how strikingly handsome, in silent sweet repose ; note the similarity in every feature to the girl on bended knees, the “ Virgin Widow ”—our heroine—Nora !

It was Nora’s custom every Sunday morning to visit the tomb of her mother at least half an hour before the service commenced, which time she reverently spent in devotion, first decorating her parent’s grave with the choicest of flowers. Poor girl ! how charming she looked ; her lithe round form draped

in mourning of the neatest description ; the sun shining through the memorial window, shedding his soft hues in countless prisms o'er the recumbent statue of the late Mrs Townsend. How inexpressibly touching in that still chamber ! the once light-hearted, happy girl, who never experienced the fostering care and maternal love, still clinging, with pious thoughts, to that sacred spot. In the words of Shakespeare,—

“My prayers

Are not words duly hallowed, nor my wishes

More worth than vanities : yet prayers and wishes

Are all I can return.”

Who has not experienced an electric thrill enter the soul whilst standing over the grave of a departed parent, husband, wife, brother, or sister—an unaccountable something, brushing, as it were, against one, pressing back, so to speak, with both hands, evil passions, and stirring up the depth and breadth of our

best resolutions? and, alas! it not unfrequently happens, when we renew our usual daily vocation, and again mingle in the busy throng of society and its allurements, how apt are we to grow cold, and forget the hallowed fire that gave promise to higher and more lasting pleasure!

The service at Carthewin Church is over: the Honourable and Reverend Lionel Branscomb's sermon rarely exceeds fifteen minutes; during which he contrives, in the most eloquent discourse, to reach the hearts of his hearers. He was never known to make any remarks that might be construed into even the semblance of a personal character. If at any time he was desirous of making home-thrusts—which circumstances necessitated his occasionally doing—he invariably “fired” into the whole of the covey, so to speak, sparing neither high nor low, rich nor poor. He was a man greatly beloved by his par-

ishioners,—truly a benevolent, kind-hearted, gentle disposition,—vigorous in mind and body ; but time and anxiety had thinned and blanched his flowing locks. He was originally the curate, but on the death of his predecessor (a man full of years), he was presented with the living by his old esteemed and valued friend Godfrey Townsend, the lord of the manor, as a reward for his untiring energies in the good conduct of the church, the schools, and the poor of the parish. With safety it may be recorded that Mr Branscomb lived a most exemplary life in the centre of the hearts of his parishioners. On his entering his pastoral duties he took unto himself a wife, a lady whose career was one of leading fashion, and not at all calculated for the duties that necessarily devolved on a partner of a minister of the gospel.

Mrs Branscomb has three bouncing daughters, who, following in the footsteps of their

mother, enter with very considerable enthusiasm into every conceivable round of gaiety that presents itself, consequently they have earned for themselves great distinction in the fashionable arena of the county. At every important ball the Branscomb girls are to be found, carrying on endless flirtations with officers of the several barracks, and the go-ahead men of the period. They are each most voluble ladies, consequently the centre of attraction amongst a certain class, who, in the busy hum and whirl of fashion, specially lay themselves out for sensational pastime. The Branscomb girls are by no means pretty, and they know it; but they have acquired, through dint of much reading (be it said, light literature), to possess themselves of an infinity of attraction, more or less pleasing to the bulk of their associates, with whom they are great favourites. In fine, they are what one may designate "all round" girls of

leading fashion ;—physically speaking, brimful of health, with warm rich colours ; medium heights ; very dressy ; and they each ride to hounds. Though not by any means the feather weight, they follow as straight as ever man rode, and pride themselves on negotiating exorbitant fences, and showing their horses' heels to many a bold rider. Mrs Branscomb thinks (with mother's pride !) there are no girls in creation that can compare favourably with her charming and highly-gifted daughters, Flora, Geraldine, and Mabel, and she is anxiously looking forward, with a parent's fondest hope, to see her dears well "settled in life." One would not wish to throw cold water upon Mrs Branscomb's maternal hopes, but one is rather sceptical of the girls attaining any satisfactory results in this direction, so long as they look for it in a sphere of life surrounded by so many perplexities and dangers,—where lasting happiness is rarely

to be found. To quote the words of Dr Syntax:—

“Beauty displays a twofold kind ;
That of the body and the mind.
Both are allowed their various arms ;
Each conquers by its several charms.
Let’s try by rule of common sense,
What is their genuine excellence.”

After luncheon, Mr Townsend and Nora drove over to the abbey, to the afternoon service at Saint Luke’s in the Wilderness, where they frequently attended ; and, later in the evening, Cuthbert and Mrs Townsend were closeted in the oak room, having a very confidential *tête-à-tête* ; whilst Gertrude was at the rectory with the Branscomb girls.

“Have you seen Nora to-day ?” said Mrs Townsend, with a slight frown.

“No, aunt, I have not.”

“How is that ?”

“Simply because she makes herself scarce.”

(The fact was, Cuthbert had been spending

the morning with his valet and the stable men in the harness-room.)

“You silly man; of course she makes herself scarce, as you term it, and will continue to do so, as long as you haven’t the moral courage to make the “running,” as the saying is amongst you fast men.”

“The long and the short of the matter is, aunt, I have made the walking, the running, and the galloping, like mad, and a more tedious bit of humanity to manipulate I never met with. Hang it all! it is perfectly humiliating to me, to be everlastingly coaxing, toying, and manœuvring in every possible way, shape, and form, that pretty cousin of mine!”

“Notwithstanding what you say, Cuthbert, I am satisfied you have not gone the right way to work; otherwise you would have reaped better results.”

“Perhaps you would not mind tearing me

a leaf out of your book of experience, aunt. You 'nailed' uncle right enough ; maybe you could put me up to a wrinkle or two."

"Nailed your uncle !" repeated Mrs Townsend, colouring deeply ; "it was simply the other way. Ah me ! bitter disappointments I have experienced since I entered this dismal castle ; my life with Nora and her father has been more like penal servitude than anything else, for years past."

"And yet you are persistently urging upon me the desirability of establishing an alliance with a girl you have no affection for : that's logic, and no error !"

"Tush !—do talk sense, Cuthbert, else I shall be apt to think what your lamented father said of you is true."

"And pray, what was that ?"

"That you had as much brains as one could conveniently put on one's nail, and no more. But, to be practical—and I am in no humour

to be thwarted—I want to see Nora married ; ay, and married, too, at the earliest possible moment.”

“No difficulty about that,” said Cuthbert.

“Explain yourself.”

“Why that great long ‘ramrod,’ that you have been silly enough to introduce into our midst, and make such an infernal lion of, will marry her straight away. You have but to say the word ‘Snip,’ and, by Jove ! he will say ‘Snap’ before you know where you are.”

“What ! Major Grey marry Nora ?—simply absurd !”

“Yes,” replied Cuthbert, “Major Grey marry Nora.”

“Do talk sensibly, Cuthbert ; you know perfectly well that he is as good as affianced to that brunette girl, Constance Templar, who I have invited here next week specially to meet him.”

“Bah ! who told you so ?”

“I have it from good authority ; and, from certain circumstances which have transpired, I have made my own deductions.”

“Then you will have to deduct, aunt, a great deal more, before you arrive at the sum total.”

“You surely must have some reason best known to yourself for thus speaking, and I have to request that you will be a little less reticent,” replied Mrs Townsend, with some astonishment.

“All I say to you, aunt, is, ‘watch it,’ or in other words, keep your weather eye open.”

“Again I say, explain yourself, Cuthbert.”

“Well, to tell you the truth, I didn’t relish uncle’s manner with Major Grey the last time we were shooting, a week since, on the Horfield estate. After luncheon, he shut off the steam, and wouldn’t join us, but made me go with the keepers a long wild-geese chase to try the moorlands, whilst he sloped away with Major Grey to the glen ; and when

we turned up two hours later, there they were, arm in arm, and nose to nose, doing the confidential, and no error. The instant we put in an appearance in the distance, they suddenly broke up their *tête-à-tête*, and the great long 'poplar' made tracks towards the Castle, and was subsequently closeted with Nora. I call it beastly bad taste, to say the least of it."

"And what became of your uncle?"

"Why, we drove over and dined at the abbey with you and the steward, but uncle was awfully glum."

"You are only alarming yourself unnecessarily, Cuthbert," responded Mrs Townsend, in an unemotional manner.

"Well, you 'watch it,' that's all."

"Have you not entreated me, Cuthbert, to intercede for you with Nora's father?"

"I have."

"Have you not, on more than one occasion,

with tears in your eyes, expressed to me how passionately you loved Nora ? ”

“ I have.”

“ Have you not promised, with the most solemn pledges that ever mortal being made, that if you could only secure Nora as your wife, that you would at once renounce for ever the turf, the bottle, and the gaming-tables, which, alas ! are bringing you slowly and surely to rags, starvation, and ruin ? ”

“ I have.”

“ What then ? ”

“ I am willing and prepared to thoroughly adhere to every promise I have made,” replied Cuthbert vehemently ; “ but that Hercules is in my way, undoing all I do ; and unless he is removed, by hook or by crook, I shall simply be nowhere.”

“ You lack self-esteem, Cuthbert ; there is no ‘ go ’ in you, except in the wrong direction, and you go that way fast enough ; you lie

down at the bottom of the mountain, which will never take you to the top, so to speak. There must be a supreme effort, and that effort must be made at once, for I can never stand the everlasting drain on my financial resources, such as you have lately subjected them to, through your wilful extravagance, and to which I have been idiot enough to respond. Hitherto I have kept these matters from your uncle, who is not aware of your having sold out, within the last twelve months, over twenty thousand pounds of Consols ; and, in addition to this, mortgaged your Scotch estates for even a larger sum. You are hopelessly involved, sir, I fear hopelessly involved ; and I know of no other way of effectually extricating you from the perilous position than by your marrying Nora, who, of course, at the death of her father, will inherit in her own right a large fortune ; and if she marry with Godfrey's consent, her fortune (even in

her father's lifetime) will be very considerable, for he has always assured me he has set aside sixty thousand pounds for the purpose ; which, it is but fair to tell you, will be very effectually settled upon Nora for her sole and separate use, and not to be liable to the debts, control, or engagements of her present or any future husband."

"That's awkward, very, and no error."

"Not at all, Cuthbert, it is perfectly consistent, and I will be no party to a scheme that may have for its object any other course."

"I shall want the eight hundred pounds that you promised me last week, don't you know, else I shall have old Solomon down upon me like a rattlesnake for that loan ; he will have his pound of flesh, and no error, and he wont renew the bill."

Mrs Townsend shuddered, and, flouncing across the room, said,—

“Impossible for me to comply with your request! indeed it is madness for me to be going on like this.”

“Then, of course, there will be little prospect of my marrying Nora, as the fat will be in the fire, and your losses will be very heavy.”

“I am not sure, Cuthbert, I hadn't better let you completely go adrift; you are, as it were, on the roof of a house, slipping slowly and surely down, and will soon be in the gutter.”

“*Apropos* of that eight hundred pounds,” said Cuthbert (who would not be denied), “try Coutts again, aunt.”

“Try Coutts, indeed! I am always trying Coutts, as you call it; and I really dread sending for my bank-book, fearing that your uncle will see how low my balance stands, when I ought to be largely in credit, and investing out of my jointure.”

“Well, aunt dear, I am investing your surplus, which you will ultimately be repaid with ample interest.”

“Don’t dear me, Cuthbert; I am sick of the whole thing—sick almost to death. I will tell you what it is, you must marry Nora, and lead a new life, or you will drift from bad to worse.”

“To what extent, aunt, have you moved with uncle in this matter? You know I am bound to lean upon you.”

“I have long since laid the foundation of your wishes, and expressed my own views pretty strongly; but your uncle is a man endowed with much common sense,—a practical, matter-of-fact person, with a clear perception of most things, consequently I have to act with extreme caution, and I have not unfrequently to finesse to a considerable extent.”

“What does uncle say to the proposed alliance?”

“Why, he always jumps up behind Nora, so to speak, saying that he must leave matters of that sort to her own private feeling ; then, of course, I am at once stranded.”

“You promised me that you would have a conversation with Nora, and use your influence with her. Hang it all ! aunt, you know how I adore my cousin. I love the very ground she walks on.”

“Pish ! I know all about your love. I did promise you, and I have acted up to it on three different occasions ; but it is the same old story with her. She, in like manner, jumps up behind her father, and declares, come what may, she will never take another step without his counsel and consent. But I haven’t done with her yet. I hate the word stratagem, but, come to the worst, it must be applied.”

“Ah ! I see,” said Cuthbert, with a dare-devil curl on his lip.

“There is such a thing as putting on the screw to high pressure,” continued Mrs Townsend.

“Ah ! I see,” responded Cuthbert, a little mystified.

“I am equal to the occasion, when I am put to the test,” went on Mrs Townsend, in a determined manner.

“I have the most absolute confidence in you, dear aunt” (the fact was, he was thinking of the eight hundred pounds), “but how about that great ramrod ? He has been loafing here quite long enough, I should think, and during that time he has contrived to take all the wind out of my sails, and no error.”

“Up with your mainsail again, Cuthbert, and steer a little more closely to the wind ; keep your ship trim, and, may be, with a good look-out and careful navigation, you will overhaul another craft that is in your way.”

“In other words, run her down,” muttered Cuthbert, with a ghastly grin, and a forced ha! ha! ha!

“I didn’t say so,” replied Mrs Townsend cautiously.

“You meant it, though.”

Mrs Townsend made no reply. Although there was an immense deal of acerbity in that lady’s nature, she knew at times how to sweeten her demeanour, when occasion required it.

“How much longer is Grey going to stay at the Castle?”

“It rests with my husband: the Major is his guest.”

“Can’t you make it ‘hot’ for him, aunt?”

“I don’t understand you.” (But she did.)

“Do the cold shoulder, and all that sort of thing, I mean; ha! ha! ha!”

“I shall always do what is right,” replied Mrs Townsend impressively.

“You are an angel, but I know your weak points,” said Cuthbert, within himself.

“Now give me your counsel, aunt. Shall I go straight to Nora, and have it out with her? She is at the abbey, with uncle. I can gallop over, and, may be, catch a quiet half-hour with her;—‘better the day, better the deed.’”

“I don’t relish your doing anything of the kind, Cuthbert; things are not yet ripe; you will make a fool of yourself, for certain, and—”

“Cool, very, and no error!”

“And,” continued Mrs Townsend, “sacrifice a golden opportunity, simply for the want of tact.”

“Then you don’t advise my tackling Nora at this juncture: that seems about the size of it.”

“It is not safe, neither are you absolutely reliable; and you may make a ‘hash’ of the whole thing.”

“Cool, very!”

“I shall be able to tell you more about it after the visit of Constance Templar. I lay plans after mature consideration, according to a set rule of my own; and I work them out to a scale of my own.”

“Ah, I see,” said Cuthbert—but the fact is he didn’t see even a yard from his nose.

Mr Rodway was a good shot, a steady bat, a charming singer, and a straight man with the hounds; when you have said that, one is disposed to think that all his accomplishments have been recorded.

At this point the hall bell rang, and Mrs Townsend left the room. Then there was a rustling of fresh brocades, and in walked Gertrude.

She stopped short at the doorway, and executed a pretty curtsy. Her blue eyes were beaming, and the glow of health was on her dimpled cheeks.

“Well, Gerty,” said Cuthbert, “you always

introduce yourself with a jubilant countenance ; it seems as though grief and care could not enter it."

"Upon my word, I cannot return the compliment," replied Gertrude. "You look supremely happy, and no mistake ! Why, what's the matter, Cuth ?"

"Been sowing some wild oats, Gerty, that's all."

"One of them has come up uncommonly white, anyhow," said Miss Townsend.

"Am I pale, though ?"

"Not very unlike a tartlet," jocosely.

"You are only joking."

"*Apropos* of wild oats, Cuth, I hope you have sown the last corn ?"

"Long since, dear," he replied ; "I am trying some tame ones now, Gerty."

"Ah ! I see,—penitent ; I trust you will have a good crop, and that they will fructify like anything."

Cuthbert leisurely dragged a chair to the fireplace, in close proximity to Gertrude, and after belabouring a large knob of coal in the grate, said,—

“Look here, Gerty, can you keep a secret?”

“I can, if I choose.”

“But will you choose?”

“All depends! don’t you know.”

“Now, drop humbug; I am really in earnest.”

“And so am I.”

“Well, then, look grave for once in your life, and I’ll believe you.”

“Now take stock of me, Cuth; I am as grave as a judge,—couldn’t be otherwise, looking at that cadaverous face in front of me.”

“And you will keep my secret?” continued Rodway, in a pleading tone.

“Like anything: hot pincers sha’n’t extract it from me.”

“’Pon honour?”

“Honour bright! as you men say sometimes.”

Mr Rodway went to the door and peeped out, to assure himself that no one was within hearing; then, resuming his seat, said,—

“I have tumbled over head and ears in love, Gerty, and no error.”

“Hurrah! of course with me!” exclaimed Gertrude, clapping her hands triumphantly.

“Well,” said Cuthbert, taken quite aback with so prompt an answer, “that would be nothing new; I have always been in love with you, Gerty.”

“I suspected” (said the tease), “when you commenced to impart this profound secret, that you were about to elevate me. I said to Mabel Branscomb this afternoon, that I was going to hear some wonderful news, as my right ear was burning so. Shall I hasten, with all possible speed, to dear mater, and say that you have proposed, and I have accepted,

subject to her approval, and all that sort of thing; and that you are prepared to make a settlement of Consols to the extent of—how much shall I say? Now, don't be mean, dear Cuth, for you know that we have all very great respect for the Government funds."

"Now, drop your little chaff, Gerty; let us be serious, and go to business."

"I was hastening to business as fast as I could; but that is just the way with you men, when you are asked to make settlements, etc.," replied Gertrude sententiously.

"I am in no humour, Gerty, for joking."

"Well, now, what is it all about?" asked Gertrude soothingly; "has the water been 'pitching' into you?"

"The long and short of the matter is, I am desperately in love with Nora, and I want your help."

"Oh! oh! oh! That is it, is it? It isn't this deponent that you are after—poor

little me! Well, well, I hope I shall not succumb to a dose of cold pison" (poison).

"You know, dear Gerty, I love Nora down to the ground."

"The question is," responded Gertrude, "does Sissy love you up to the skies? If that be the case, the great space between heaven and earth will abound with your love. But, joking apart, of what service can I be?"

"If you are in earnest, and you really have a regard for me, Gerty, you can render me valuable assistance—yes, help me more than any other living soul on earth."

"You know I am only an atom on the face of it," replied Gertrude.

"But you have great influence with Nora."

"Have I? If you mean what you say, you simply don't know her one bit; and if I don't mind my p's and q's, she puts me down flat on my back, so to speak, before you could say Consols!"

“Curse the Consols !” said Cuthbert, within himself. “It is beastly provoking she should harp so on those infernal Consols !”

“But I am morally sure you can help me, Gerty. Plead for me, my dear cousin ; speak of me as you have always found me ; tell her, with tears in your eyes, that—”

“Tears ! fiddlesticks !” interrupted Gertrude vehemently. “I haven’t shed a thimbleful since I was short-coated, and I am not going to aspire to them just yet.”

“Well, you know what I mean, Gerty ; plead with all your eloquence. I know you can give me a lift, if you like.”

“Have you met with any favour from Nora ?” asked Gertrude, giving her cousin a searching glance.

“Well, to tell you the truth, I cannot say that I have. Whenever that long ramrod is ‘mooning’ about, she gives me the cold shoulder.”

“What ! Major Grey ?”

“Yes, Major Grey,” viciously.

“You needn’t bother your head, Cuth, about him ; they say that he is engaged to Constance Templar.”

“Walker ! Don’t you believe it ?”

“Well, she is coming here on a visit in a day or two, and the fat will be in the fire, and a pretty frizzle there will be if the Major neglects her ; she will possibly cut him into ribbons like ‘anything’ But, tell me, Cuth, what does the dear mater say about this love song of yours ?”

“*Entre nous*, she is exceedingly anxious that I should propose to Nora, and that Nora should accept. Of course, Mrs Townsend is well aware of the fact that she may go farther and fare worse ; besides, we should be keeping all the coin in the family !”

“The what ?”

“The coin—the cash !”

“Oh, I see ; you mean the settlement of all your Consols.”

Cuthbert bit his lip ; the last observation of Gertrude’s was a sore point ; nevertheless, he replied, with an assumed pleasant nod,—

“Certainly.”

“Well,” said Gertrude, “I will have a serious chat with Nora when I get the chance.”

“And you will do your best for me ; won’t you, dear Gerty ?”

“This atom will do the best for you both,” said Gertrude soothingly.

“There’s a dear good little cousin,” replied Mr Rodway, and, entwining his arm around her neck, was about to give Gertrude a hearty kiss, when she uttered a fearful scream, which echoed through the whole Castle.

“Good Lord ! what on earth is the matter ?” exclaimed Rodway.

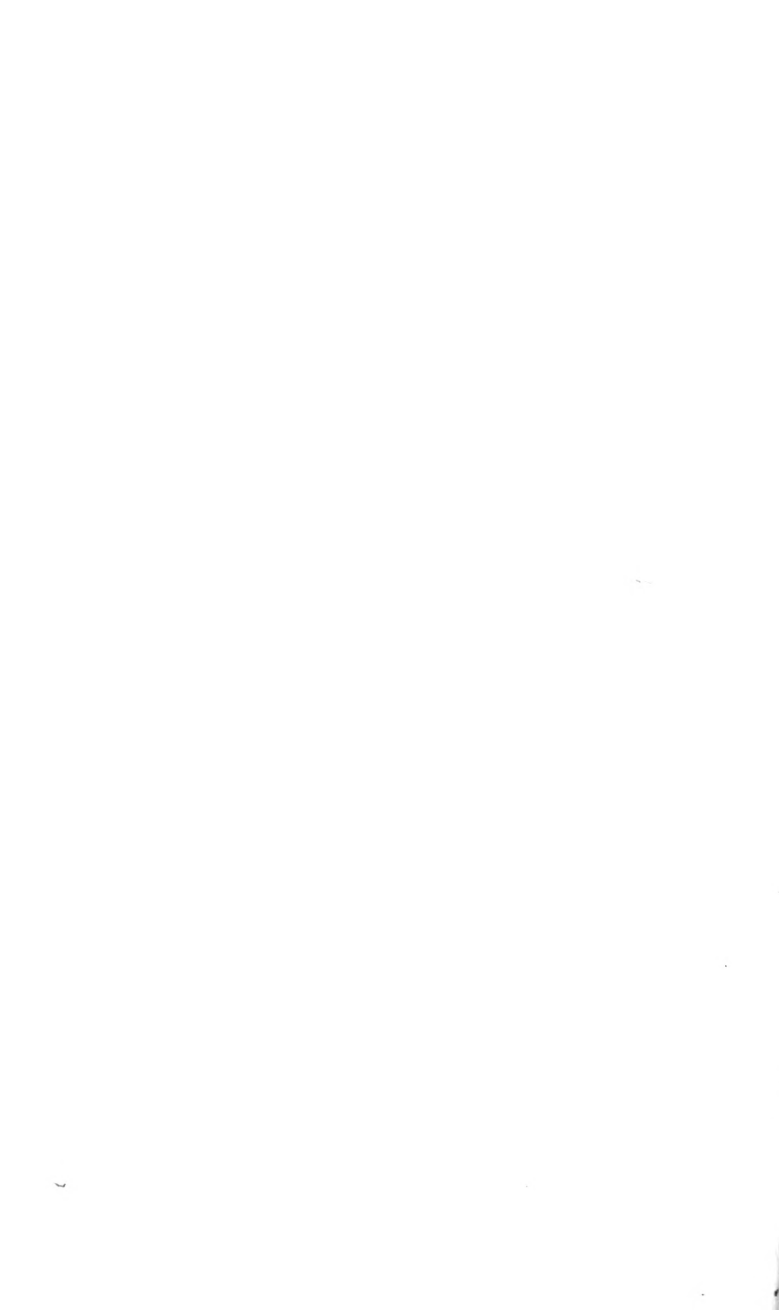
“Oh, Cuthbert, Cuthbert! did you not see?” pointing to the window, the blind of which was half drawn up.

“See what, Gerty?”

“Why, a horrid white face, pasted, as it were, to the window, with a ghastly grin on the countenance!”

“You are dreaming, child—you are dreaming!”

“Am I! I am very nearly fainting! Get me some water, Cuth; quick, quick, quick. No—don’t leave me; ring the bell for Leonard! Oh, that horrid, horrid, white face!”



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